

















# DARKENING DAYS

*BEING A NARRATIVE OF  
FAMINE-STRICKEN BENGAL*

BY

ELA SEN

WITH DRAWINGS FROM LIFE BY  
ZAINUL ABEDIN



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## Dedication

"Some have eyes but will not see,  
Some would see but have no eyes,  
Miss the tryst but find the tree  
And take the lesson for the prize."

FRANCIS THOMPSON

## FOREWORD

*THIS book is admittedly written from a woman's point of view, if on this account over-emphasis is laid on the vicissitudes of women during the dreadful days of last year it is not for want of appreciation of the sufferings of men.*

*The short stories which make up the major portion of the book have all been culled from real life. Names have been altered, but the facts remain. These are not imaginary characters, nor phantasies born of association with relief work. They are live people, real people, not phantoms strutting about on a literary stage. Readers, I hope, will look upon them with the eye of reality, and understand that to verify this they have but to go beyond the door-step of their cities.*

*The famine is not over. A cry has gone up that it is, and philanthropists have begun to curtail their philanthropy. The sufferings of our people have been deposited beyond our vision to give credence that all is well once more. But the aftermath is upon us, the havoc created by famine has to be faced if the people of this province are ever again to live fully. Epidemics are now ravaging the countryside, and adequate medical aid has so far not been possible. Rehabilitation is hardly understood by the majority and not sufficient importance is laid upon it. It is still planned on an amateurish scale. To bury one's head ostrich-like is no solution, it merely wards off the evil hour for the time-being. In this volume I have*



*endeavoured to show the urgency of our needs and on how large a scale relief is necessary if ever Bengal is to be re-incarnated. How soon and how completely this can be done depends on our handling and understanding of the situation. What Government will do or will not do, or cannot do, is not enough excuse for non-official relief work to stop. The suffering and distress is too close to us and just raging against the inefficiency of others will not help to save our people. The sufferings of people like Lakshmi or Juthika or Sukhi (referred to in the succeeding pages) should not have been in vain.*

*I would like to acknowledge my thanks to my friend Satyabrata Chatterjee, for whose help in collecting material for this book I am grateful.*

ELA SEN

CALCUTTA, APRIL, 1944.





## PREFACE

A STORM blows over the countryside, little eddies of dust rise up to meet it and are whirled away to sink back to the ground somewhere else far away. The storm passes, the clouds lift but the fallen tree by the wayside, the roof of some wretched hovel lying prostrate and derelict, and the stray garbage floating in the little streamlets that have appeared in the pathway cannot be as easily disposed of or ignored. A famine came to Bengal in the midst of plenty, and has left in its wake broken minds, damaged bodies and crushed hopes. No longer does the sight of a good green crop bring exultation to the hearts and a smile to the lips of the agriculturist, for no longer does it spell security from at least hunger for him. He greets it apprehensively and with reservation, for much of it is already mortgaged to his landlord, who in his turn has sold it to the smooth-spoken merchant from the cities. There has been a bumper crop but the hands to harvest it have, alas, been few—most of the male population has perished, many have grown decrepit through eating offal, others are stricken with malaria and all have been weakened and debilitated by malnutrition and starvation. The soil of Bengal has not been false to those that tended her, out of her womb she has brought forth ample, but who shall garner in the wealth of her gifts? Gaunt

skeleton hands stretch out for the sickle and feverish eyes grown bright on the sharp edge of hunger's rawness watch greedily over this promise of new life. Parched lips that have forgotten to smile crack and part to leer hideously and a sob bursts from the throat as memory of those lost ones brings overwhelming desolation. Lamentation echoes from hill-top to plain, it pierces even into the concrete houses of the rich whose walls are not as impervious as their hearts, and it reaches the ears of the profiteer and hoarder—and does he still smile? This is the resultant aftermath that has to be faced and combated.

How shall I characterise the spirit of this spectral population of Bengal? Out of such starvation and exploitation revolutions have been wrought in other countries when hunger-maddened crowds have rushed upon death to endeavour to bring forward a change of rule or government. But these people whose sufferings have exceeded all human realisation have only had recourse to lamentation. There have been no curses, no abuse, no desire to feed themselves at the expense of the rich, but just passive tears. This acceptance, this terrible passivity has been the curse with which we have watched our people develop cunning and a beggarlike importunity which they would have held in horror at one time so much had they prized their respectability. With a tragic realisation one has watched the utter demoralisation of spirit, as they floated about begging a morsel, without leadership and without a

leader. If they had risen in a body, however disorganised, and *demand*ed food instead of *begging* for it, one could have hoped for an organisation growing out of it whereby their voices would have been heard. Instead they moaned, they begged for a handful of rice they had grown by their labours and they were denied it. Bitterness grew in a hardened crust round their simple trusting peasant hearts, and the insensibility of the world crushed whatever hopes and beliefs they might have had. Had there been leadership, concrete and strong, to help them out of this fatalistic inertia, their souls would have been saved, but now they wallowed in the quagmire of superstition, *karma*, and predestination. They welcomed the pipes of death playing its bitter sweet melody, and shut their eyes to the importance of living. Even in the days when they had dragged their debt-laden lives on from year to year and had existed without actually boasting of life, there had been compensations in the contact of man and woman, in the birth of a new child, in the laughter of children and the celebration of festivals—but now they were faced with hungry mouths clamouring for food that could not be found, thin hands upraised for one morsel, parents forgetting parenthood in the scramble for food, wives selling their chastity for it and children falling by the wayside with eyes glazed in death. What incentive could such a people have for wanting to carry on this hideous nightmare of life? With them was dying the future of Bengal's agriculture;

the little hands that would one day have grasped the plough and the little maids who would have brought forth peasant children were lying inert, uncaring, piled insensitively on the same funeral pyre. Leaderless and lost, all thoughts of nation or country drowned in the vital, gnawing, primeval pains of hunger, the population floundered on in a spirit of reckless bitterness. Many and sundry tried to minister to their bodies, but nobody thought of the shrivelling up soul.

A strong imperialism triumphant within and a virile and powerful foe at the gates is no time for revolution, since it can but result in the unnecessary killing of innocents and the installation of chaos. One does not take advantage of a national calamity to bring a greater plague, but one seeks leadership that will knit the hungry millions into one strong force that will demand of a corrupt government the death penalty for the hoarder, proper rationing and price control and considerate planning to safeguard the future. It will also warn fearlessly that they are pro-Fascists who do not urge and labour ceaselessly for death to profiteering in the food grains of a people. The prosecution of war upon Japan would have been hastened and become more efficient if Bengal's eighty millions had not to face this food crisis. This leadership would call upon all who style themselves anti-Fascists to eradicate the black market in rice so that greater co-operation, greater war effort and production might be demanded of the people.

Instead the accredited leaders of the Indian people are imprisoned—and they have no contact with the people who shift about lost and unguided—a prey to fifth column and imperialist propaganda; the purchasing of new crops has been made over to the hoarder; rationing in cities has done little to ease the situation in the villages; people have lost all purchasing power and no alternative occupation is planned or found for them. The shadow of another famine hovers in the background and the Jap invader is at our gates. Bengal's tragedy must be viewed from an all-India angle before there can be a correct focussing of its urgency—for it is true that upon the development of her situation depends the life of India. She is the spearhead of the war against Japan, and the prosecution of any war is hopelessly hampered by a hungry, discontented and epidemic-ravaged population. All the men and materials which the United States and Great Britain can pour in can be of no avail unless Bengal's internal and vital affairs are handled from the point of national interest. The war is unnecessarily lengthened and ultimate ends jeopardised thereby. Imperialism has failed to adjust its perspective as it is inevitable that it must, but we the Indian people, too, have failed to bring this disaster and imperialism's failure to the anvil of our national needs. The leadership that consolidates such moments into the momentum of a movement has been wanting, and all efficacy of public agitation and thought has been lost in



the alleyways of policies and controversies. Caught in the midst of conflict, the people flounder and suffer hopelessly.

Japan came openly into the war in December 1941, and Rangoon fell in March 1942. From that time a whisper rose that the Burma rice had gone and India might be faced with a food crisis. Japanese invasion of India seemed imminent, there was panic, evacuation and general confusion. War industries were being speeded up, and in certain big concerns factory workers were being given a dearness allowance from 5 to 6 per cent. It was during this period of confusion that the profiteers went quietly about and began to buy up rice all over Bengal. If the Government knew it did nothing about it; if it was not aware it can only be adduced that it had given way to panic. About April 1942 there was a general stir that the price of rice was rising, from Rs. 5/- per md. it had gone up to Rs. 10/-. Much was made of the loss of Burma, until it was found that only 5 per cent of Burma rice was imported into Bengal, and a quantity of fine India rice used also to be exported to Burma. People who had begun to think of India on a war time basis begged for rationing to be enforced, for the ceiling price of rice and paddy to be fixed—and a result of this agitation was the controlled shops which instead became nests of abuse, profiteering and graft. At that stage there began the first exodus from the rice producing villages into the cities—a strange anomaly of position. The granaries of the

villages stood empty and lonesome, the godowns of the merchants were full and overflowing. Rice released for the consumption of the people was three times too little as compared with the crowds that clamoured for it. Strange things began to happen that had never occurred before—a trade in gravel sprang up for mixing with rice and thus shortening the weight of the actual grains. No longer could people choose what rice they would eat, they had to take whatever was given to them, which was quite often a mixture of two or three types of grain. In many markets *goondas* took over the distribution in controlled shops, and appropriated one-third of the grain for black marketing purposes. Graft became rampant from petty to high officials. The price of rice soared up to Rs. 40/-, except in the controlled shops whose stocks gave out within a few hours. The streets of Calcutta resounded with the cry of people that were hungry.

This was the beginning of the vast procession that trod unknown paths to come to the city to look for food. They were unaware of the tragic significance that their hands had sown and garnered the very food they sought in the gaunt by-ways of the city, hitherto it was they who had fed the cities—to-day they were destitute and crying for food as for charity. Drove of them—men, women and children—flooded the country roads, jumped trains and somehow footsore and weary found their way into the cities. And what sort of welcome did they get? The pavement became

their homes, they forgot that once they had possessed a home for had they not sold the roof over their heads for the price of thatch to buy food? They took possession of the city, and in their begging and importunity the cry of the villages came home to the city dweller. One could not open one's door but there was a whole family sitting silently importunate, gaunt and hungry-looking. One could not lift a morsel to the lips of one's children but there through the window looked in the hungry-eyed children of the poor. They were ever at one's elbow, emaciated and hungry, and as spectres they rose to embitter the luxuries of the well-to-do. Their reproachful look followed one about as they hunted amidst garbage for some forgotten morsel of food, or sat on the pavement opposite one's comfortable and hospitable mansion and deliberately ate grass and offal. They died, too, as uncomplainingly as they had lived, and with eternal hunger in their bellies there was little time to be wasted on sorrow. When they could wander about no longer, they just stopped by the wayside anywhere and lay down to die. The passers-by made a great deal of fuss, talked of ambulances etc., but the dying child gazed resentfully at them as with a whimper its troubles ceased for ever. The mother, with her shrunken breasts, watched immovably while death stalked near her. There was nothing she could do about it, who was she to complain? The little one was at least at peace from their wanderings and the

fire in its belly that had fast consumed all the flesh.

Out of this ghastly panorama there emerged one beauty—motherhood. Emaciated, broken in body, with a baby in her arms and three others clustering round her ragged remnant of a *sari*, she trudged miles every day looking for food for the hungry little mouths. They whimpered, they cried themselves to sleep and she would spread her rags over them and look after them as tenderly as under ordinary circumstances. Through all the abnormality of her life the woman never forgot or grudged her motherhood. Wherever she went she kept her brood close at her heels; whatever she found was first for them though often she looked on with wolfish hunger in her eyes. Untiring energy, undaunted love and greatness characterised these simple peasant women who had become destitute of all worldly possessions. There was hardly a case where a mother deserted her children, though there were many women left to their fate by their husbands. Through the most dire trials and needs they begged food and clothing for their children first, and were more grateful for any care lavished on their little ones than for anything one could do for them. Many of them were pregnant and this too they bore with a quiet pride, though so many had to make the pavement their place of *accouchement*. It is an eternal tribute to motherhood that in the midst of death this tiny spark of newborn life had the gift of brushing a smile

over the lips, and a still-born child had still the power to bring a tear from eyelids sore and heavy-laden with trials and sorrows. In the midst of this primeval cry for food the gaunt and spectral mother with her brood of skeleton children epitomised the spirit of Bengal's women—undaunted and alive in the midst of death, pure as a flame amongst garbage. Was it a newer edition of Niobe that greeted one? Or could it have been yet another version of the Madonna?

One question rises naturally from this—how then did they sell their children? How then did they become victims of prostitution? Those women who sold their children did it only as an extreme measure, when they felt that no longer could they do anything for them and that it was better they should get a proper life with somebody who could. It is not surprising that their perspective should have gone awry, where they only focussed their eye on the choice between life and death and be unaware of the vast question mark—what after that? They passionately wanted their young to live, and for this they sold or “deserted” their children in such convenient places where they felt they would be taken care of. The immediate urgency of their need made them easy prey to those who take human flesh in slavery. A large number of women became bereft of their senses through privation and want, and rather than watch their children die slowly and in pain, they would put them out of their misery—in the same way

as an animal will not allow a decrepit offspring to live. It is true also that the ranks of prostitution swelled and this was due to two reasons—mainly because young and middle-aged women were won by the chicanery of procurers who lured them with smooth promises of food and shelter, which to the destitute meant heaven itself; and because unwittingly mothers sold their young daughters to the agents of brothels promising to look after them in a good home.

\* \* \* \*

Free canteens and cheap canteens sprang up in every corner of the city, and the destitute were made welcome to the food. The citizens of Calcutta responded eagerly to the call of the starving but while they attended to the need of the moment how many thought of the future that was to come or the past that had been? The Indian heart responds easily to deeds of charity, which are of avail in a God-given disaster but in a man-made one there are other things that are of greater value. The idea of service for the needy inspired individuals to action but very few gave thought to the idea of after this what now? Hoarders and profiteers eased their consciences by releasing a small fraction of the food grains for the use of those that had laboured to produce them. They became charitable, benevolent, but the black market prospered. They donated money to canteens and there was no public conscience that rose up and flung their filthy

lucre in their faces ostracising them for traffick-  
ing in the staple food of a people. Through all  
the magnificent aid given by individuals and  
organisations this spirit of "outcast the  
hoarder" was absent thus exposing those they  
wanted to benefit to exploitation by the pro-  
fiteer. Where public spirit failed was in not  
indicting those who had been guilty of profit-  
eering and who were still keeping the black  
market alive, in not plucking the viper from  
their bosoms to be trod to death under the  
weight of a public conscience. These their  
brothers had asked for bread and had received  
stones—for all their service and charity was  
lost if the real cause could not be located or  
isolated. It is no use blaming a government,  
for no government can last on misrule if the  
weight of united public opinion demands that  
hoarders, however powerful, be summarily  
punished and examples made of them. There-  
fore I say that in spite of the daily, hourly,  
great service that the people of Calcutta gave,  
they failed to do the maximum.

Then the Viceroy came down to Calcutta  
and found the streets of the city converted into  
public latrines, the drains flowing with filth,  
people crowded together and huddling for  
food—the population of Calcutta swollen  
abnormally. The destitutes held the city, and  
the citizens were at their service. He realised  
with a great shrewdness that people cannot  
bear to see misery but once it is out of their  
sight they become forgetful and callous until  
finally they lull themselves into thinking that

it does not exist. It was also bad for the morale of British and American troops who had the famine-stricken spectres before them and had begun to ask awkward questions of what was wrong where. Journalists were, in spite of heavy censorship, making good capital out of the state of affairs. Bengal's famine had become India's show piece, and foreigners from all over the country came to see what it was like. The people of India responded from their hearts in donating for Bengal relief—it was something that had touched them vitally and found a response that all the Red Cross and War Savings Certificates had not. Therefore Lord Wavell decreed that the destitutes must be repatriated, the streets of Calcutta must be cleared and if the provincial government was unable or unwilling he would get military help for this purpose. Then began the sweeping of human garbage off the streets of Calcutta—the culminating tragedy of a shocking spectacle.

Fear shook the destitutes as they saw police vans, A. R. P. vans with uniformed attendants picking up people at random and taking them away. Where? Rumours were rife, and as a breeze whispers sprang up: "Let us run away, back to our deserted villages, rather to die there than be sacrificed here." Mothers weeping for their children were forcibly picked up and carried away in these vans; when in desperation they tried to escape, rough hands tied them by their hair in their places. Children, perhaps left by a



mother gone in search of food, were taken away sobbing bitterly for their mother. Thus husbands, wives and children were separated through official inefficiency to handle the situation and their general unwillingness to secure the co-operation of the public who had the confidence of the destitute. It is true that the citizens of Calcutta wanted the streets cleared but not in this high-handed fashion that caused them to range themselves on the side of the destitute, giving them shelter and hiding them from the official vans. Hiding under bridges and culverts, or in the back porches of indulgent residents, they would creep out by night feeling secure in the darkness. They whispered together fearsomely crouched in the darkest corner of what they were to do. Horror and despair overwhelmed them aggravated by the wanton official behaviour and circulation by rumour-mongers of the probable fate of those who had been picked up by the vans. Then the great exodus began and to escape forceful repatriation nearly 80,000 men, women and children faced the rigours of the journey back and the probability of starvation at the end. It had never been explained to them as to the real reason, where and how they were being taken, and when some explanation was given they just did not believe the police or civic guards or any official source. Wherever the people of the locality intervened, the result was usually a meek compliance with their request, but the majority began their trudge on foot. The road back was increasingly dreadful, for

they saw neither hope nor promise at the end. To what were they returning? True a new harvest was ahead of them—but prematurely aged men and women, fallen prey to the evil effects of malnutrition had little left that was promising. Many of them had sold even the roof of their huts, their eating vessels, and in the case of tradesmen their articles of trade such as looms etc. They were penniless—what was there for them to look forward to? Thus a silent band of weary travellers went on and on, trickling back to their villages much the worse for their absence. When they arrived at their destination, a feeling of home overcame them, and tears rolled down their cheeks, but quite soon the tragedy of their village lives was unrolled before their eyes. Deserted, roofless hovels, in some places nothing stood that had been there before—those that had stayed behind were dead, and so many of those who had gone forward had also perished. Only on both sides rose the paddy, tall, green and golden—all that remained to speak of the hands that had planted and tended it. The luscious crop swayed gently in the breeze, welcoming them back—but was it theirs? They did not dare to think but wept in the utter desolation of all that had once been so familiar and dear to them.

\* \* \* \*

The loss of Burma rice having been exploded as not being extensive enough to scarcity, and the cyclone and floods having

been found to be responsible for 15 per cent loss, the disappearance of the remaining 80 per cent can only be put down in hoarding and profiteering. Hoarders can be subdivided into three classes of criminals—the big trader who buys from the agriculturist at say Rs. 9/- a md. and sells to government for Rs. 15/—this is to-day when there is rationing—but previously these traders were sending millions of rupees worth of rice underground for the black market so that rice could not be found in the open market. Long after the cyclone and floods had come and gone, came the long awaited *aus* crop last August, but that passed underground and no relief was felt in the situation that prevailed. In fact, only after the repatriation of destitutes and enforcement of rationing such as it is, the hoarded *aus* rice began to be unloaded in the village market. This was proved beyond a doubt by the fact that the harvesting of the *aman* crop (December) was not over, yet rice that had disappeared began to trickle into the open market. But alas for the destitutes bereft of all buying capacity; they had not the wherewith to buy this rice—thus even with it on sale in the open market the people suffered starvation.

The second class of hoarder, who has been created by the demands of the big trader is the agricultural landlord, who holds back rice from the normal channels of trade to be able to get a better price from the profiteer. In fact, his misfortune is also great because he sold off even his seed grains at what he thought a very

profitable price, but when he wanted to buy rice for his family, leaving aside the question of seeds for the next crop, he found it had gone from the open market and could only be had at abnormal prices (at one stage Rs. 40/- to Rs. 60/- a maund) in the black market. His greed in trying to make money at the risk of starving his landless labour, and in believing the smooth-spoken words of the city merchant, constitutes his guilt.

Also aggravated by the abnormal conditions introduced by the big hoarder, the upper class householders turned panicky and in their turn began to hoard rice. Afraid that a day might come when no longer at any price would rice be available, they purchased in the black market, kept large stocks in reserve for their consumption, thus in their turn helping the black market to function. These people are in our midst, among our relatives, our aunts and uncles, and their actions give actual proof of how little the consciousness of a national calamity had penetrated. It showed a want of conscience and a desire to safeguard their own interests, without realising that as long as this scale of profiteering continued and the majority starved, they with all their hoards were not safe; ultimately it would reach out to them also in many ways. Such a type of hoarding showed up the anti-social mind of the upper class public as well as a want of realisation of reality, and was as contributory and as dangerous to the general situation as the afore-mentioned two classes.

Thus the misfortunes of Bengal, aggravated as they were by cyclone and floods, became a thousand times more inflamed by indiscriminate and merciless hoarding and profiteering. These may be constituted as the main reasons as to the destitution of the people of this province. Let it not be imagined as it was once remarked that "the Bengal famine was made by Bengalis"—far from it, it was engineered by Hindus, Moslems and British alike, and the guilt lies heavy on each one of them. The profiteer was in the midst of them all, like vampires upon the bosom of Bengal.

What were the repurcussions of their deeds—that is the greatest indictment upon those who allow the black market to still flourish and to engulf not only our food grains, the clothing off our backs, leaving our children naked and shivering during the cold winter days, the drugs and medicines which are needed for the fight against epidemics, but our women as well. That is the sum total of Bengal's tragedy. Who suffered most? To answer that question briefly, one would have to say—they who were the weakest either physically or economically. In this, to take a general census, one finds that the severest repurcussions fell upon the women, who are in a body to-day faced with social disintegration. Next on the list one would place certain classes of men such as landless labourers, the weavers, the fishermen and the potters. These people had to depend for their food on the agricultural landlords, who having sold out to

the hoarder left this class of men free for exploitation. The resultant effect of this is terrible. The landless labourer forced to migrate with his family to the cities, unable to find employment between the two harvests, sold even the last of his possessions to be able to buy food—but even so all his assets were not sufficient to secure food for himself and his family. Malnutrition and actual starvation, coupled with malaria in epidemic form, caused such an undue strain upon their physique that many just perished, while those who were tougher perhaps gradually became decrepit and weak, therefore useless unless restored to a proper and balanced diet. The weavers sold or mortgaged their looms during the crisis for these were their only valuable assets; as such, those who have weathered the storm find themselves without a trade or employment and families—in fact, whole communities—are faced with ruin. Little large-scale effort is being made by the State to reinstate them in their trade by buying looms for them or by taking out those that are mortgaged, and hand-weaving which was a speciality of this province is seriously endangered thereby. Large areas are affected, yet neither adequate loans nor co-operative planning is forthcoming. Fishing, too, was an important industry, since there was a ready market and the rivers and tanks abound in a large variety of fish, but this famine has just swept the fishermen out. Many of them have died, being dependent for their food grains

upon the local landlord and having few assets to realise; others that live are ravaged by epidemics to which their condition of debility has made them susceptible. This is applicable also to the potter whose resources are as limited and totally dependent on others and therefore these economically dependent people were sold unmercifully to the hoarder.

The question of how vitally it affected the women is wider—because their suffering was from all sides, economic as well as moral. It is strange to relate that a far higher percentage of men and children perished during these times than women for somehow in spite of the odds against them they clung tenaciously to life and were not willing victims of demoralisation. The men suffered a queer psychological reverse on their reduction to beggary, and their mortification and humiliation was so great at having to revert from honest toil to begging that they rather welcomed death than continue the struggle for existence. Women fought against this apathy and instead of allowing the whirlpool to drag them down, they struggled to get out of it. It left them worn, battered and bruised, mere wraiths of their former selves, but they lived. Thus there came into being a vast army of white-clad women—widows young and old—and an equally large number of guardianless girls. In shoals they went back to their homes—to find what? Alone, homeless and workless, often with emaciated young ones in their arms. The situation was fraught with tragedy and

left them open to the designs of those who take advantage of any situation to traffic in human flesh. Since rice had reappeared in the market free kitchens closed down, but these women had neither money nor work, so they just had to starve unless . . . . . Some persevered and sought whatever work they could find, others resisted all blandishments until the fire in their bellies and the constant demand for their bodies made them reckless enough to be susceptible to the all-winning promises of food and shelter. Thus prostitution or death became the twin possibilities for these women, and the presence of the military provided greater opportunities for a strange and new black marketing—in women. Thus family life which was the keystone of all stability for them was gradually becoming disintegrated, until it has assumed such alarming proportions that Bengal's entire womanhood stands menaced. The ground is being cut under their feet. The villages are far and secluded, so people may think that this poison will not appear on the surface, but they are also the nucleus of city life, therefore sooner or later the cancerous growth will eat into the vitals of society and all security will vanish.

Shall we then blame those who had struggled to life out of the chaos of those critical days to find that they were truly destitute, that there was no planning for them, no provisions and the crossroads facing them were towards death whose soothing voice they had spurned so long or to the wide and shaded



avenue of prostitution? They wanted to live, to labour and to perform their share of national life, and they were condemned to the penal servitude of brothels. The inability to prevent this has branded shame across the hearts of Bengal's patriotic children—yet why are they powerless to prevent these innocent people being sacrificed into the ever-widening maws of prostitution? Because food and the people of Bengal have been made a pawn in the game of power politics, and until the public conscience is powerful enough to acknowledge this, we shall go on from one phase of degradation to another.

Ministries came and ministries went while lamentations and cries for food rose up in a black cloud of general indignation. But men still intrigued, still fought to keep a ministry or unseat it. The people and their food were utilised on platforms for such purposes. The public cursed whoever was in power, but were totally unable to handle a situation that was being tossed about between a handful of power-seeking politicians. But the tragedy has lain in this that this atmosphere of vilifications has been utilised by bureaucracy to interpret the utter incompetency of Indians to handle provincial autonomy. Every cry raised against the existing ministry, however well-merited, was a blow redirected by imperialism to prove India's unfitness for freedom. It is true that the provincial governments were totally incapable and not sufficiently disinterested to compass a solution of the







tragic developments, but an equally heavy share of guilt rested on the Central Government, the Viceroy and the Secretary of State for India. It was the core that was rotten and therefore the flesh had grown poisonous, but never was the attention of the world once focussed in this direction, it has been diverted upon the unfortunate provincial government. But bad as it is, no government could have existed at this time that could succeed in the only solution of this problem because of the rot at the Centre. Much has been spoken of autonomy and national government—but the falseness of such phrases is borne upon any student of contemporary Indian politics with the national leaders of the Indian people in imprisonment. The Congress still remains the greatest power in Indian affairs and while it is bureaucracy's aim to discredit Indian leaders and provincial governments, it is the blindness of the people who do not see through this game—or is it perhaps the self-interest of a few?—and rise up in a body to demand a government that will be truly national in character. The entire edifice of imperialism must be destroyed and democratic rule established if such tragedies as Bengal has experienced are to be avoided. In final analysis it is correct to characterise this famine as not “an act of God” but a political failure.

## THE CO-WIFE

It was eight days now since Lakshmi had been home, and as she awaited the escort who was to take her back, she thought hopelessly of that other day five years ago when she had been wrenched from the bosom of her family amidst tears and smiles and carried into a strange household as a new bride. Lakshmi was only twelve when her father decided that she should be married, so overnight she attained adulthood. Previous to that she had been a child roaming the fields with her pals, robbing fruit, picking up green mangoes which a more adventurous soul shook down for her. With her *sari* across her immature bosom and tied securely round her waist she had led a vagabond existence. But the decision of one person—her father—had put an end to all freedom, attached an importance to her person which she could not but enjoy, and she suddenly discovered that she was grown up. It was a painful process in her whom maturity had not as yet touched—a tight bud she was being prized open—but the novelty of leaving childhood behind her was delightful. Of course she had always known that marriage was inevitable, girls were born for that, but its actual approach left her breathless, frightened, but intrigued as well. Lakshmi staring at the banana grove, whose green fronds waved like banners in the golden sunlight,

wondered if that other bride had also had women of the neighbourhood crowding round her doing as they had done for Lakshmi—helping to bind her sleek black hair with gold and silver tinsel, reddening her feet, and winding a piece of bright red ribbon through the plaited hair. They had wound a red *sari* round her soft brown girlish body, and unaware of anything that awaited her she had been filled with an emotional resurgence. She smiled wistfully as she looked down at her now fully developed woman's body, and wondered why in spite of all normality and allure she had been created abnormal. How she had been frightened then at the proximity of an unknown male, and she wondered if the little bride of a few days ago had also felt the same. A tinge of pity and sympathy touched the bitterness in her heart with its softening fingers.

"Lakshmi," called her mother, "here is your brother come to take you to your husband's home."

"Coming, mother," she answered composedly. The family were gathered together to bid her goodbye, awkward and silent as she bent before her parents for the customary obeisance. Her mother held her closely and a sob tore at her bosom, as she wanted wildly to beg for refuge with them. But she had been brought up in the hard school that teaches that a married daughter has no niche in her father's home—her family have no further responsibilities or duties towards her.

Her father coughed through embarrassment feeling somehow unaccountably that her resignation was in itself an indictment upon him. He was helpless, impotent, powerless to protect her. The neighbours crowded round them in the background of the courtyard murmuring: "Such a comely wench—yet what a misfortune to befall her!" "Fate! Who can say what lies before one!"

"It's tragic," murmured the young wives, fearfully, praying inwardly that they be preserved from such a fate.

But Lakshmi was silent, tearless, as she set out on her homeward journey. It was early afternoon, and the sunlight was glistening upon the nearby pools fringing the banana leaves with gold. The grey huts huddled together sleepily in the heat, the paternal pipal tree rustled faintly in the breeze as its slender tipped leaves glistened cool and inviting like the tapering hands of a woman. From the nearby cotton tree one scarlet blossom floated down and lay at her feet—it was April, the month of marriages.

As she trudged along she recalled vividly that first journey in state. She had been so proud and conscious of her newly acquired dignity that when she stepped into the palanquin, it had been with a heart full of thrills and anticipation. The rhythm of the palanquin as it swung to and fro, the song on the lips of the bearers had all been woven into a sheaf of experiences. Even now her heart quickened at the memory of how she had



slowly pushed the door ajar when the bearers had put her down to rest and caught a glimpse of the man who would henceforth be the master of her destiny pacing by the side of the tank. Quickly she had shut the door overwhelmed by the newness and gravity of the situation. She had been the centre-piece of that bridal journey, and he was her setting. The fuss and the noise of her arrival, tearful and afraid, still filled her ears, as she had been accepted as a daughter-in-law of the house and the wedding bangle was put on her hand. After that it had been such a medley of ceremonies, confusion and always people coming to see the bride. Were they doing exactly the same thing to the new bride now? She wondered if they ever thought of her—she knew that her husband did, at that thought her control broke and tears rolled torrentially down her cheeks.

“Hush, little sister,” said her brother, “you must be brave. It is no fault of yours—it is what the gods have decreed. I pray you dry your tears.”

She did, she dried them in the corner of her *sari* and thought that this pathway to her husband's home was destined to be watered by her tears—first the tears of a frightened, girlish bride, then the tears of a rejected wife—what then after that? Along the avenue of her married life she had sown tears—what would she reap, she wondered. But there had been smiles too and laughter as well, those first days of conjugal happiness when she

had realised what it was to belong wholly to somebody—both of them had laughed a great deal those days. Dully she wondered—when had she first sensed the shadow? It was such a small thing at first—nearly two years ago, when her grand-aunt-in-law had said jokingly: “I don’t understand, you young ones of to-day. In my day a buxom girl like you would have borne at least two children by now. What’s the matter with you, child? You’d better look out—or your mother-in-law will think of getting another wife for Subol!” The old woman had laughed her toothless smile, and frozen in shame and embarrassment Lakshmi had pulled the *sari* lower over her head. Then the mother-in-law had turned upon her: “Really, my dear, it is overtime that you produced a son to keep on the family name.”

It had passed over. No word had been mentioned of another marriage and Lakshmi had never taken the grand-aunt-in-law very seriously. But was it six months ago—or was it centuries ago?—that the midwife had examined her and pronounced her physically unfit to bear children. The local *pundits* had announced that her husband had no further moral obligations towards her. At first she had been stunned but the whiplash of contempt had driven her to her husband. Lying at his feet, kissing them, bathing them with her tears, she had begged to be given a chance—he had said never a word of reproach nor given her a crumb of comfort, he had merely

lifted her from the floor to weep unrestrainedly on his bosom.

The whispers had come gradually at first and then faster until it could no longer be hidden from her that a second wife had been selected for Subol. This time Lakshmi said never a word, a terrible feeling of resentment had taken possession of her, but she was determined that she would go home at least until her rival was installed. Inevitably she must return to face all the horrors and heart-breaks that she knew would come but for a time she must be allowed to leave. Therefore one night in the privacy of their bed she had said to her husband: "Please allow me to go back home for a while." He had burst out defensively, incoherently: "I could not help it, Lakshmi. Mother weeps, father storms and the priests say that for the sake of the family I must do it. Don't blame me, please, please." He had held her hands in his. Not one word had passed her lips, not a tear had betrayed her as resentfully she said to herself: "It's all an excuse. Everything for the family. One whole human being to be sacrificed at the altar of family pride. My happiness to be cancelled by one stroke for the credit of the family. There is no forgiveness for that." Afterwards when she had repeated her sentiments to her mother, she had been assured solemnly and sorrowfully that for the sake of one's family and one's community everything had to be sacrificed—one's honour, one's happiness, one's sentiments and one's sensibilities. There

was no other way; upon this pivot was constituted village society.

But to him then she had only repeated :  
"I wish to go home."

"For how long?" he had asked breathlessly. "For ever?"

"Alas no, just for a while, may be a week or ten days. My place is here, there is no room for me there."

So it had been. She had been back to her parents carrying the tale of her shame. They had been kind to her but pointed out firmly that she had to live her own life with the family to whom she had been grafted. And now her vacation was over, and here she was on the doorstep of her real home. Again she could not resist retrospection in comparing the almost utter indifference towards her return now with her first coming as a bride.

However, here she was. At the outer verandah she met her father-in-law and paused in obeisance before him and then passed on into the women's quarters. Lakshmi felt strangely like a ghost, a disembodied spirit who is drawn to its old haunts of love and sorrow. Everything was unchanged except for her. She wondered objectively where she would henceforth sleep. Ah, there was the old grand-aunt-in-law, sitting in the declining afternoon sun, but Lakshmi avoided her and suddenly remembered that this was the hour when the women usually went to bathe. No, she could not bear to face the whole village at the tank side. It would *have* to be to-

morrow—why sooner? In the kitchen her widowed sister-in-law was handing over the fire; at the sound of her footsteps she turned round and cried, “Lakshmi, sister-in-law, you have returned!” and embraced her with tears in her eyes. Lakshmi was amazed at her own calmness now that she was face to face with the dreaded thing. It was so ludicrous, as if they were weeping over her dead body while she still lived. She could hear voices of women returning with their well-filled pitchers on their hips—she too would be in that throng to-morrow. The creak of the primitive back door told her of the near approach of her mother-in-law, so she braced herself for the final ordeal. “Be still,” she said furiously to her heart that was leaping about rebelliously, and she felt unusually weak—as if all resistance had been drained out of her by her emotional upheaval. Lakshmi bent before the mother-in-law, who lifted her up and said: “May God preserve you long in your wifehood!”

Wifehood! who had robbed her of it? Lakshmi wanted to ask.

“Soudamini,” called the older woman, “here is your elder sister, your *didi*, to whom you must give all obedience and love.”

Lakshmi looked down at the small round face, everything was round about the child and she was like some frightened, cuddly creature of the woods. Now she looked up afraid, awkward and apologetic at this serious-faced woman whom she had replaced. Quite

suddenly Lakshmi felt old and mature as if the wisdom of ages was hers in comparison with this young uncertain thing before her, and it was with an effort she roused herself to say : "I welcome you, sister."

That first night back in her familiar niche was intolerable, and a vast resentment against her husband possessed her. The new bride had been allotted Lakshmi's quarters, and she slept alone on a mat not afar off. Wide-eyed she lay torturing herself with visions of Soudamini's girlish allure, her rounded body and her proximity to the man who was hers. Fiercely in her heart she reiterated it, but lay back in the horror of her position knowing the futility of her claim. Nobody disputed it but nobody valued it either. Once she heard a whispered protest, a faint giggle and her mind and soul became hot with anger within her. In the darkness of the night when the heavy breathing of the household spoke of sleep, Subol crept in slowly and sat beside her. She remained mute, all the resentment of weeks flooded her heart, and sobs tore at her throat. "Lakshmi, forgive me. I could not help it. I have not given you up. I shall always want you with me", he was whispering, "I know it is damnable, but I had to do it. Forgive me, my wife."

It was physically impossible for her to reply, she only clung to his hand, touched his feet, thankful even for this—that he was not indifferent, that he understood her sufferings and above all he was her husband and she

could deny him nothing, least of all her forgiveness. He had stepped off his pedestal to ask for it, she was but his handmaiden—this life and her eternity depended on how she served him. This had been her teaching.

In the days that followed, emotional bitterness became submerged in a new calamity that threatened to engulf them all. Its hooded terror stood above them, its fangs outstretched to strike at them. The women were bewildered and could not understand how it had come about—but it was true that there was a scarcity of rice. For some days now the men had whispered fearfully in corners, quite impotent to prevent the calamity that was sweeping on towards them and quite unable to take a grasp of the situation. The one significant fact was that they that produced rice, tended the crop, had to *buy* rice. How that had come about they were powerless to fathom. The reality was there, and it was imperative to conserve whatever resources were theirs. The women decided that they should eat once a day, and the men and children keep to their normal diet. Very soon this too became impossible, and it was once a day for all. The little ones wept, cried and fretted, their mothers deprived themselves to feed them and thus lost weight rapidly.

Even while the fear of the calamity stalked them, the normal things of life brought an elusive sense of stability. Soudamini was with child, but nobody thought of the horror of an already undernourished mother bringing into

the world yet another mouth to feed. Into the hungry eyes of the mother-in-law a flame sprang up—at last, praise be to God, the family name would be preserved. If somebody had asked her what for, she could not have replied, but nobody did. Like the last flicker of a dying ember it had brought warmth to their family life. Soudamini, pale and emaciated, looked abnormal in her pregnancy, but the feel of the infant in her womb created a sense of intense pride that in spite of everything, she was going to experience motherhood with all its joys and pains. She was abnormally, terribly hungry and craved for food she could not get and in spite of the poor quality of nourishment they scraped together for her, the child in her womb grew and grew.

Hunger is primeval, so is jealousy, and the twin forces tore at Lakshmi and rended her. Her taut body was gone, her breasts hung loosely and there was the knife-keen look of hunger unsatisfied about her lips. But transcending all physical discomforts and privations she was being devoured with bitterness and hurt pride. Every time she looked at Soudamini who like a graceful tree was bearing the burden of her fruitfulness she was filled with an agony far exceeding all the pangs of hunger. She had never hated the slip of a creature, she had perhaps resented her, but now she just hated her as a rival. The household with all its burdens revolved round Soudamini, but Lakshmi in all her misery lay forgotten. It was strange, she would think,



how like a hurt animal she had stolen into her corner avoiding them all, even her husband, and from there she would sit and resentfully watch the worship of expectant motherhood. Her own belly had lost all its smoothness, and shrivelled into wrinkling tissues, and quite often in the bitterness of her heart she would pass her hand over it and wonder rebelliously why, why, why? But nobody ever saw any evidence of this revolt against fate and custom, it was all taken as a matter of course.

One morning Lakshmi's father-in-law came hurriedly indoors seeking his wife. There was a general commotion at such an untoward event, and the daughters-in-law pulled their *saris* over their heads and bent forward at their various tasks. The old man passed them by unnoticed, he was past his prime and rather bent. His wife was in the kitchen, cooking whatever meagre portions of rice they still had: "Wife, I have something important to say. Please come here", said the old man. She looked up irritated: "What can it be now?"

"It is important and urgent," he reiterated. Handing the ladle to her widowed daughter-in-law, she went towards him wiping her hands.

"My dear, things are very bad here. There is to-day no rice in the market."

"What! It can't be"—she was staggered.

"It can be and it is," said the old man, "so we must look for food. They say that in the city food can be had, and there is rice in the

market. So I am going there to-day, in fact, just now, with some others and will try to buy in some store." The woman licked her lips, all of a sudden she felt thirsty. "You? No, no, how can that be? Let the boys go," she pleaded.

"Don't be foolish, woman, they are young and useful here. I am the only one in the family that is spare, and what do you think is going to happen to me? There are neither lions nor tigers in the city. Be sensible."

So the old man went, and the mother-in-law suddenly felt empty and drained of all life. Such a thing had never happened to her during the forty years of her married life—she felt helpless, guardianless, as callow as a young girl. During the days that followed, and the shadow of misfortunes grew darker and darker over their threshold when they drifted rudderless out into the sea of chances, her tongue lost much of its sting and the fire went out of her retorts. Days passed and no word came from the old man—where had he gone? What had he done? Nobody knew, and they felt that something dreadful and dreaded must have happened. Tortured by uncertainty the mother begged Subol: "You go, my son, and look for your father. Bring him back. I fear for his safety."

"But who will look after you and the women, mother?" demanded Subol.

"Bolai and Kanai are here, the neighbours are kindly and there is much sympathy where one suffers together. I cannot bear this separa-

tion any more, my son. I shall take my life if no news is forthcoming."

Reluctant and heavy-hearted to leave the family, there was nothing else that Subol could do. He was scared, too—what had happened to his father? and he felt that he must have Lakshmi's sturdy wisdom beside him at this moment, so after many days he sought her out :

"Lakshmi, I am leaving for the city."

Startled she asked, "Why?"

"To look for father."

"Take me with you," she pleaded, "I have no place here, nobody will miss me."

His face lit up, he had dreaded the loneliness of the unknown.

"Will you really come, Lakshmi? It will be so hard for you, so difficult."

But she was almost happy again, as she tied her meagre belongings up into a bundle and prepared for the journey. The mother-in-law sunk in her morbid thoughts said nothing. Soudamini, clad in the inward fire of her on-coming pregnancy, seemed impervious to partings. The rest of the household immersed in their own cares and miseries gave the pair hardly a thought.

As they looked beyond the touselled tops of the coconut palms, and skirted the cool depths of familiar tanks, they were struck by the air of desertion in the whole village. Mangy curs prowled along doorsteps, skeleton-like cows uncared for munched what grass they could get. Children with extended bellies, sunken eyes and spindle legs hung

whimpering round the huts. There was no life, no laughter, just brooding over the morrow. The slender path that wended its ribbon-like way on to the wider road leading to the railway lines answered to the friendly pressure of their feet with the lingering touch of something known and familiar. Beyond it lay the unknown.

Lakshmi would never forget that journey by day and by night, picking their way over railway lines, travelling part of the way by train, being turned out for having no tickets so that when finally they arrived at the outskirts of the city they collapsed under a tree to eat the *muri* they had brought with them and a mouthful of cool, fresh tank water. Thereafter they found themselves tagged on to a surging stream of humanity that was pouring into the cities, as a river breaks its embankments and floods the surrounding country. They were driven along with this tide on to free canteens, through narrow lanes flanked with tall, gaunt buildings, among the clamour of tram cars and buses, to rest upon the pavement. No longer had they any will of their own; they were always moving with the crowd in search for food. Subol realised the horror and futility of searching for his father, so he and Lakshmi became part of this vast band of gipsies—homeless, destitute and hungry. They watched men, women and children searching hungrily amongst garbage, eating offal and giving way to general degradation. It was ghoulish, but they were part of this spectral

band. What else could they do? Somehow their souls shrank from begging or scavenging in muck heaps for food, and Lakshmi said to Subol: "People in the cities are rich—would they not keep us as servants?"

"But what can we do? I am only good on the fields."

"I could cook," she said, "and you would do other things," determined that she would try to struggle out of this bog that was slowly sucking them in.

At the next free canteen to which they went for food, Lakshmi found that the server was a kindly woman. So she courageously said: "Mother, have you no work for people like us? We would like to earn our food, it is so hateful to beg." The woman looked up surprised, but the queue waiting for food was long and she said briefly: "Come along tomorrow and I might have news for you."

Subol and Lakshmi found work with a young couple, who were both working, so somebody had to look after their house. Uninitiated in housework but supremely honest, the pair gradually gained confidence in themselves and of their employers. At the start they struggled to give satisfaction, made many mistakes, but the thought of clean, honestly earned food twice a day kept them at it until they had mastered the intricacies of city house-keeping. It took Lakshmi some time to realise that there were no tanks from where to get water, or bathe; but that water came from taps, or that latrines were meant to be used. But

very slowly, they were becoming used to strange and new things.

Subol, however, was restive in spite of his new found security, that he had failed his mother. He could not help thinking about Soudamini and his child that must now have been born. Yet he realised, more than ever, since he had become adjusted to his surroundings, the futility of hoping to find one person in this vast sea of surging humanity. Had the old man survived the sufferings? He doubted, yet he felt that both he and Lakshmi had escaped from the reality of their lives into a sheltered harbour, and therefore he felt guilty. Lakshmi was not slow in realising this, and though her exclusive possession of him had given her such happiness in the midst of insecurity and destitution, she realised that he was right.

One night, after their master and mistress had gone to sleep, Lakshmi while spreading her mat in the kitchen verandah said :

"I feel I would like to go back and see how everything is at home. And if things are bad we could bring them all here to share what little we have."

Subol started with pleasure: "Let's go; when shall we start?"

"Both of us can't go, and my dear, you are more useful than I am, because I could never lift those heavy buckets of water up to the second floor, and the mistress could manage my cooking easily. If you wish I will go and bring back word of how it is with them."

Subol admitted it was the best way, even though he was reluctant to let her journey alone, but as Lakshmi pointed out their sojourn and vicissitudes in the city had hardened her to withstand a great deal.

Going back was even more difficult than coming in for it was like struggling against the tide. Vast crowds were drifting citywards, ever citywards as if in search of some El Dorado, some talisman to return to them their sense of security, and the tendency to be carried with them was strong. But Lakshmi persisted with a mixture of feelings—why had she come? The bitterness and jealousy that had lain smouldering within her was slowly coming to life again, yet there was something that impelled her onwards to find out how it was in the village home. She realised that she had feared her husband's brooding would rise up as a barrier between them again, hence she had undertaken this journey; but as the familiar landmarks approached she felt unequal to the task. What would she find? His child in her arms—the formal and final indictment of man and God against her. She had walked all these miles for that. It were better to turn back even now. But what would she reply to Subol's eager questions? Or how quench the light in his eyes?

There it was—the derelict temple of Shiva, where she had once stolen in in fear of snakes and scorpions to pray that her shame be taken from her. But the God had been silent. The tank beside it lay brooding, somnolent, and

uncared for, full of green weeds. A general air of dreariness accompanied her, only heightened by the long drawn out howling of some dogs. Patter of children, the bustle of life, the general hum of a population was missing. The grey huts clustered forbiddingly together, resentful of prying eyes. They seemed to hold their secret jealousy. Lakshmi was afraid and obsessed with a premonition that all was far from well, which she strove to crush. The feeling however rose in her heart with every step she took and threatened to choke her.

At last she was at the doorstep of her home—how familiar the outer *dawa* was! There was the banana grove, the green fronds waving in the sunlight gave her back a sense of security. As she walked in a stray cur rushed out as if frightened by her footsteps—Lakshmi paused. This was strange! Was nobody there? Raising her voice, she called out: "Hullo, people! Who's there?" Silence all round,—silence that was closing in on her. She rushed into the kitchen—there was no vestige of a fire on the hearth. Then frightened, overcome, sobbing, she rushed from room to room. A few rags hung here and there, a *charpoy* lay upturned, garbage and filth were strewn everywhere. On the other side of the courtyard there was another small room and in despair she thought perhaps somebody was there and she rushed on.

Lakshmi stopped aghast. It couldn't be



true; no, she felt it was a nightmare she must thrust from her, push it far away, run away, but do something about it. She stood still with horror in her eyes. Soudamini—or was it her skeleton—lay there—stiff and pale, and a squirming worm of an infant was sucking at her breast. The warm young lips clamouring for food, tore at the dead breast. Slowly Lakshmi knelt down. Ugh, how cold Soudamini was! Then she felt the child—warm, palpitating with life. She picked the baby up in her arms. It snuggled up to her, its mouth searching, searching. Forgetful of death behind her, nursing this spark of life in her arms, a new world was unfolded before Lakshmi.

## THE UNKNOWN

IN the spacious ancestral home of the Chowdhury's Durga Puja was being celebrated. The house was dark and massive but the laughter of children and the tinkle of jewellery created an atmosphere of festivity, while the multi-coloured *saris* splashed colour into the scene. Everything was festive, and the mother of the house was happy that she had been reunited with her children and grand-children. These were dark days when one never knew what happened, therefore at least she longed to have her lambs about her at this time at the feet of Durga.

Inside the house the clash of cymbals mingled with the soft voice and gentle laughter of women and the monotonous chant of the priest continued amidst the coming and going of worshippers. Outside there was a long and ragged queue, waiting, for ever waiting, for the crumbs that would fall from this house of festivity. At times their impatient voices penetrated into the halls above: Má, oh Má—just a handful of rice, Má,” or “Even a cup of rice-water for my little ones!” Amidst the bustle and the noise of life and laughter the women would pause for a while, and then turn away—how could they satisfy this vast train of beggars? Yet their importunity had pricked the bubble of enjoyment they had conjured up. The inscrutable goddess accepted the gifts and

worship of the rich—did she not hear the wailing voices that came from beyond—or were they her step-children?

Subhadra clasped Gour's little hands and sat in the street expectant of some food. Her old father had collapsed upon the pavement—but what could she do? The child was getting fretful and whining: "Má, when will they bring out the food? I am hungry."

"Hush, darling, it won't be long now. See the sun is right overhead, that means it is noon. and as soon as they have finished *their* food we shall surely get some."

The little naked body shivered in its weakness, you could have counted every one of its ribs. On the edge of the crowd a man was selling balloons, marvellous globules of varied colour stained the brightness of the day. Gour's eyes lit up—and he stared unwinking at those intangible fairy-like things floating in space. He was fascinated and even the fire in his belly was numbed by this pleasure of the senses. Beautiful, was all his body and mind could express. Then the massive iron gates were pushed open and a boy a little older than himself, neatly dressed in a red *punjabi* and clean white *dhoti* came out. Gour only saw him because his eyes were following the balloon man who answered the child's signal. With wide open eyes the beggar-child watched the vendor take one of the balloons and hand it over to the child, who delighted with his toy shut the gate behind him. Gour watched the balloon stream-

ing bravely over the boy's head gradually vanish from his vision and he felt he had lost something. With a sob he turned upon his mother: "I want one of those, Má, please Má."

Subhadra was spreading a wet piece of rag over her father's face, and had seen nothing of the drama. Mechanically she replied: "Be a little more patient, darling, I can hear them just finishing their lunch. Soon, very soon, they'll give us food."

"No, no, I want one of those bright balls. That man gave one to a child. Mother, mother—get one for me," persisted Gour.

But Subhadra had seen the gates reopening and a large pan of gruel being carried out, she must rush otherwise there would be none left for them. They were all rushing, pushing, jostling, tramping over those who had fallen through exhaustion. She no longer heard what the child wanted, it must be food, and there it was. With a hurried "Sit here beside grandpa and wait for me," she too joined in the fray, pushed her enamel platter forward afraid lest she be left without food. The balloon man had disgustedly moved away from this clamouring crowd with their stinking rags. Some did not even have utensils, they were getting the rice poured into their dirty rags. With a start Gour realised that the man with the lovely toys was moving away, a sense of loss came over him and resentment that his mother had not even paid the slightest attention to his request. Rising upon his unsteady legs he began to run towards the

balloon-seller and the balloons dancing and wavering like butterflies seemed to beckon him on. Grandpa faint with hunger had not the energy or the inclination to stop him.

On, on went the vendor oblivious of the stumbling, halting little figure that crept after him. The balloons still danced and gleamed and winked at Gour, calling him. The distance between the child and the vendor began to grow until he and his wares were little more than a vision that like a mirage pressed the child onward. He was weeping now, sobbing, calling out: "Oh, please wait, let me catch up to you. Please, please—" until quite suddenly he tripped and by the time he had recovered himself he found that the vision had vanished. In his despair he flopped down on the ground, and gazed around fearfully. Where was he? "Mother!" he screamed, "Mother, where are you?" The passers-by stared at yet another destitute child abandoned by the wayside. But Gour knew his mother would be looking for him, so he got up and ran as fast as he could irrespective of direction. He was breathless, torn and weeping, when he turned a corner and came upon a queue. Relieved and also afraid that his mother would beat him, he slunk round the back of the crowd. Ah, there she was, he'd just pretend he had been hiding, thought Gour. He went up behind her and pulled at her hand: "Mother!" the woman turned—this wasn't his mother. Panic-stricken he ran from one to the other: "Mother, oh mother—" but always it was a stranger that

he saw. It was as if his mother had been turned into a cavalcade of strange people, and his piteous cry: "Mother, *Má, Má ré—*" filled the street until through sheer exhaustion he fell asleep sobbing by the side of the gutter.

It was quite dark when after her round of free canteens Radha was finding her way back to a shed she had discovered under a booth where she crawled in with her baby girl to sleep. It gave her shelter from wind and rain, and the unwelcome attention of pimps who were always ready to find a protector for one. This day she stumbled against something, something that was soft and warm—a pi-dog maybe, she thought, but it whimpered as a human child whimpers and sobbed "*Má, oh Má.*" Something tore at Radha's heart and bending down she found a small child lying in the dust and grime of the gutter. His eyelids fluttered open and unable to distinguish features in the gathering darkness, Gour said: "Mother, is it you?"

"Have you got lost, my son?" asked Radha. Finding yet another stranger, his frightened sobs burst out afresh: "I can't find my mother. Oh, where is she? I have lost her."

He could say no more, he was incoherent. The defencelessness of the child broke her heart, and she said: "Come with me for to-night, to-morrow we shall find your mother."

Eagerly he got up—saying: "Do you know where she is?" and clung hopefully to her hand. A wry smile twisted Radha's lips, she









who had a job to keep herself and the baby girl alive had taken on the responsibility of another life. She gazed wonder-stricken at the tall houses that rose up on either side, from where came the muffled sound of many voices and even the shrill inconsequent laughter of women, but not a door, not a window had opened to the cry of this childish heart. Homeless and houseless, waifs of the street, one more or one less—what did it matter?

In the morning, however, Radha did try to question Gour, but all he could do was to lisp his own name and say that he had a Ma and a grand-pa. Where or how far he could not say but would repeat "Over there" and wave his hand vaguely. There was nothing for Radha to do but keep him with her. She could of course have abandoned him but somehow her mother's heart could not bear it. So clinging to her *sari* he would trudge bravely and wearily from free kitchen to free kitchen. But Gour was always watchful, he said nothing but not once did he stop looking for his mother. He never cried now, and he was grateful to his foster-mother for her care but at times in his dreams he saw again the native village, the children, his father who had become so shadowy now, old grandpa and best of all his mother. She would bend over him smiling, not as she had been lately, always harassed and troubled, but her old self—robust and happy—but as he would stretch out his hand to clasp her to him she always slipped away,

and he woke up with a cry to find that it was only a dream. Gour was no longer wayward, he listened obediently to Radha, played with the baby when they rested by the wayside between meals, as if he was fully conscious that over her he had no claim and therefore he must not give her more trouble than he could help.

Pearly-eyed dusk was descending gracefully upon the city enfolding the misery of the destitutes in her gracious embrace, drawing her shadow across derelict humanity dehumanised and over the filth and garbage of the streets. There were no lights, these were the days of black-out, therefore a darkness palpitating with voices, groans and sobs descended upon the unquiet city. Restless life slunk past in the shadow of the night, the city seemed to have lost for ever its gift of restfulness. Strange and evil things kept vigil with the darkness, and only crawled away to hide with the first traces of dawn. Time for these people of the streets was a mere interval between the opening and shutting of canteens, between the period that their bellies were completely emptied and partially filled—it had no further significance for them. Their future and their past was for them telescoped into the bitter urgency of the present. They rather resented night because it hid their importunity from the eyes of the world.

It had grown a little later than usual and Radha was hastily trudging back to her shed with the two children. The baby had fallen asleep but Gour toddled along bravely, if a

little wearily, by her side. She had ventured further into the city than she had hitherto done, and was now rather anxious to get back to her shelter for the night, when she became aware of footsteps beside her. Unaccountedly afraid she walked faster dragging Gour with her and the steps too increased their speed. Out of the gathering dusk a voice said: "Why so fast, mistress? Busy to-night?" Radha did not reply, her heart was beating furiously. It spoke again: "Two children—and no food. Why do you sacrifice them? If you don't look out you will be losing them soon. Come with me, there will be rest, food, money."

Radha hissed out: "Get out. I want no truck with you."

"Silly woman," the voice persisted with a laugh, "I know you will listen to me. You only want a little persuasion. Your children will be cared for. You will have ornaments, clothes, food and rest. Come along, woman, why hesitate? Is the pavement better than what I offer you? How long will you or your children last?"

While he was speaking Radha was thinking rapidly. She looked round wildly, she was now in a respectable middle class locality. The streets were absolutely quiet, except for a passing rickshaw and a few pedestrians. It was horrible but the man was speaking the truth—this sort of life of vagrancy could not last for ever. But she could not give up the principles of a lifetime as long as she had the strength to fight on. Without a thought she

rushed forward and banged on the outer door of one of the houses.

"They won't open", taunted the voice still beside her, his shape indistinguishable in the darkness—a thing of the darkness. "And if they do they'll chase you off, you'll see." While he was yet speaking the door opened, and he slunk behind a tree. A man peered into the fast gathering dusk: "Who is it? What do you want?"

"Help!" cried Radha. "Shelter for myself and my two little ones just for the night." Irrespective of where she was going or what she was doing, her one desire was to get out of this tormentor's sight. The man appeared to hesitate, she caught the sound of a chuckle somewhere behind her. Then a young woman was framed in the doorway, holding a lantern:

"What is it, father? What's happened?" Radha clasped her hands: "Just give me shelter for to-night, *didi*, I am in great distress. Please, please—" Bharati looked at her father and said impulsively: "Please let them come in, I feel she is in great trouble." The old man said wistfully: "They all are, my child, but, yes, let her come, I only hope she does not murder us in our beds or run away with our valuables."

Bharati did not stop to argue, she knew that he was right, but she did feel that the woman was in some kind of dreadful danger which she could not fathom, so she hustled her in and shut the door. Outside the shape

slunk away in search of other prey, uttering foul-mouthed curses like the poisonous breath of some carnivorous animal. In the warmth of her shelter Radha sank back exhausted and could only repeat: "Thank you, thank you. We shall clear out to-morrow morning", but Bharati smiled, and found her room in the adjoining cow-shed. After many many nights Radha slept comfortably secure and almost happy.

So they stayed—Radha, the baby and Gour—and stayed for many days. Bharati's mother found in her a willing maid-servant, and Bharati adopted Gour. His solemnity moved her to laughter and she named him "Achin" or the Unknown. From the beginning Radha had been on the defensive about him: "Whatever you give me to eat I shall share with him. Please let us stay, the child will not cost you anything extra." She explained that she was the boy's foster-mother, that he had just adopted her one night. Who he was or where he came from she could not tell. So "Achin" was given a new shirt to cover his nakedness, fresh milk to drink and a bowl of steaming rice at noon and at night. He pattered after Bharati as a puppy dog after its master, but when night came he curled up beside Radha and the baby. In the beginning he would hold a corner of her *sari* in his hands, as he went to sleep, so scared was he that he might lose her too but gradually he was won back to security. Yet ever in his heart there was sorrow, it lay coiled round

within him and nothing could dispel it. He relied on Radha, loved her, was genuinely attached to the baby and would nurse her patiently for hours, was devoted to Bharati but always he ached for his mother. He never spoke of her—what was the use? Nobody could do anything for him he had realised, but he was only a small child whose world had lain in his mother. He felt as if somebody had removed an umbrella from his head in the midst of a rain-storm. Just that sense of helplessness and not belonging filled him, and he could not but long for the shelter of those maternal arms. Often he would look up into the sky and the winking stars would come closer and closer to him until he felt they were his mother's eyes—tender, understanding and loving. But as soon as this realisation swept over him they would again withdraw up, up, up, until from far away they gleamed at him coldly distant.

Suddenly one morning there was a great commotion and Bharati called to him: "Achin, your mother is here." Radha was washing up some utensils and for a second her heart seemed to stop that she must now lose the boy who had so unwittingly crept into her heart. The child was laughing and crying in one breath as he ran up the back steps and then stopped short. That was not his mother. He felt resentful, for in his heart he had known it would never be; he had lost her for ever. The woman was holding him at arm's length: "You are my child—aren't you?"

she was babbling; "No, you are not. Is your name Ganesh?" Gour shook his head and told her his name.

"Never mind, perhaps I've forgotten. He too was like you, very like you. I left him to go and get some food, when I came back he had gone." Quite suddenly Gour was afraid, perhaps this mad woman with tousled hair would take him away imagining she was his mother. He cried out aloud and ran away to the shelter of Radha's arms: "She's not my mother! She's not my mother!" he screamed; "I will not go with her. I want to stay with you."

"Hush, hush", Radha soothed, "nobody shall take you away. You shall stay with me."

The woman had followed him down and was looking at him sorrowfully: "Perhaps he is not my son. I can't tell; at times, you know, things become so hazy. He is here near me and then he is gone." And muttering to herself: "I shall never find him! Never find him!" she walked away from them.

But the episode had disturbed Gour, and he felt more than ever that his mother was lost to him for always. He hoped other women would not try to claim him—anyway Radha had promised that she would not let him go, and he went back to the serenity of their lives hugging this thought to his heart and who shall say that Radha too was not relieved?

Thus it happened one day that Gour was watching the milkman milking the cow early in the morning; Bharati had just come out of



her bath and was getting ready for college when she heard a commotion outside their front door. She peeped over the balcony, remarking to herself that in Calcutta it did not take long for people to make a sensation out of something very casual and ordinary. She noticed however that people were pointing towards their house, without disclosing who was the centre of attraction. Bharati was intrigued and went down to the front door to find a miserably thin woman and an old man waiting to speak to her :

"Sister", quavered the woman, "have you a child here whom you have rescued?"

"Another claimant for Achin", Bharati said to herself; to them she said: "Yes, we have a little boy here—would you like to see him?"

The milkman had just finished and Gour was watching the white frothy liquid with fascinated eyes. He knew that as soon as Bharati came down he would get his little glass filled with it. Ah, there she was now, calling to him. Then he stopped, just for a second and with a cry: "Mother, Oh mother! Grand-pa!" he flung himself into waiting arms. Attracted by the cry Radha came out of the kitchen and watched Subhadra enfold the child as if in a last embrace. The old man was shaking and muttering: "God be praised! It is all His will, His desire!"

The mother and son clung to each other while tears flowed from their eyes and mingled together. Bharati was forgotten, Radha was

forgotten, nothing mattered any more to them except that they had found each other. Subhadra had trudged wearily for months and days looking all over the city for her child. Finally she had persuaded her father to take her to Kalighat where she had prostrated herself and vowed eternal worship to the goddess if her son were found for her. At the entrance to the temple she had met another destitute like herself, looking for her son, slightly crazy, who had said to her: "He said he wasn't my son." Subhadra had pricked up her ears and with much cross-questioning had obtained directions to this house. Now they had found him!

"My son, my darling son", was all she could murmur. Tears falling all about his dimpled face Gour felt her over with his podgy fingers—she was really here. The glorious reality rushed upon him. Her eyes like stars shone with tears as they welled up and rolled over. Stars! Stars! At last they had really stepped down for him within reach of his arms.

## THE QUEUE .

THERE was a stir of life upon the pavement, and in the half light of dawn they looked a ghostly crew conjured out of another world. Somebody kicked somebody else, and a child cried out. That seemed to be the general signal for awakening, and there they were twittering and babbling under the trees, and folding up their ragged clothes. The atmosphere was foul with the smell of filth in which they had sat the whole day and whole night, defiling the freshness of the morning.

Shyama roused her mother-in-law, and tried to quieten the whimperings of two-year-old Batu. They had arrived too late yesterday to get a favoured position in the queue, and after having trudged over miles of dusty road their disappointment had been keen. What a journey it had been! In her eagerness to reach the city where rice was available, people had said, after days of starvation it had seemed that the old people walked too slow and the little ones held them back. Shyama had imagined the city as a kindly mother welcoming them, full of promises in the depths of her maternal bosom, so she had clasped her old mother-in-law by the hand and picked up Batu in her arms and tried to hasten the progress. But they had arrived too late, and halfway down the line the rice had given out. Her mother-in-law fatigued

and hungry had beaten her forehead and wept, her husband had just squatted on the ground resentful and sullen, while Shyama herself dully wondered if instead of an *el dorado* she had wandered into the witch queen's domain. Everything round her was foul—the people mouthing curses at each other, fighting with dogs for a scrap of something that had been discarded as refuse, women with a brutal and vicious look in their eyes and children that cried and cried.

Last night the little family, like numerous other little families round them, had spread themselves out on the pavement to await to-morrow's distribution. Shyama had been amazed at how these people who had once had stability had become used to the life of vagrants. They felt no shame in sitting upon the pavement and picking lice from each other's hair, or that their children played about in the gutter and fouled the place indiscriminately. They made not the slightest effort to move off but clung grimly to their places in the queue. Those who had been able to obtain something cooked it and shamelessly ate it before the hungry eyes of the others. One woman had cooked grass with shrimp shells which she and her children had devoured greedily. Shyama had shuddered wondering if she too would become like that some day, and had lain down while the fire in her belly played havoc within her.

It was morning now and the amber sunlight picked out the filth and grime of their

condition. The rush had begun. Shyama dragged her mother-in-law along, her husband was already in the men's queue. For a second she paused to look back at him—gaunt, unshaven, with the watchful, furtive look of those in want—and she wondered if it was really him or his wraith? Had she too changed as he had? Sorrowfully she thought that everything had changed—what did it matter about two insignificant units like themselves? People were trying to push her out, sensing that she was new to it, but Shyama struck out with her elbows and found a position for herself and her mother-in-law. The old woman, hardly able to stand, clung to her sturdy daughter-in-law's waist.

Solitary, like a desolate island amidst a sea of human beings, Kusum sat on the pavement. She held her child in her arms, she hugged him fiercely, but he remained still and unresponsive. Somebody passing by had flung callously at her: "He is dead!" But she could not believe it—how could it be? It was only last night that his feverish hands had clung to her, when that horrible whisper had first come to her ears: "He is dying because you cannot give him nourishment. Come with me and you shall get all you want." At first she had resisted, but finally the whimpering of her child had made her frantic. He had been such a bright merry creature, not many days ago, full of life and mischief, but there he had lain, only an occasional whimper showing that he still lived. Kusum felt she

could not lose him, she had lost them all, all—they had all fallen by the wayside and this last one she must save at any cost. Where was the man who had promised her everything—he was at her elbow and slowly she followed him.

Dully, with a queer pain searing her heart and brain, she wondered how she had done it and how any man could have found any pleasure in her filthy, wizened body. Hunger had drained all sex out of her. But there had been so many of them who had made use of her woman's body. They had given her food which she had eaten ravenously as like ghouls they stood round her waiting for their pleasure. Their faces were lost in the delirium of those awful moments, when she had wanted to rise up and claw at their throats. But the thought of her child who must be saved had withheld her, and she had allowed them the use of herself as if she were just refuse too. If her soul had been anywhere about, it had wept in shame and humiliation, but her body had remained motionless, dead, her thoughts intent on the money she would get to buy food and medicines for her little one. Would he ever forgive this defilement when he grew up? With this came the thought—would he ever attain manhood? As she looked down at him, she acknowledged dully but without resentment that he never would.

Kusum had stared greedily at the two rupees they had flung at her—it was hers, she

had torn out her soul and sold it but the money was hers. In the morning she would get all that was necessary for the child, and as she crept back to the pavement she clutched the money feverishly in her hands. Her head was reeling, she felt weak and bruised, but somehow she stumbled to her place under the tree where the heap of rags told her that he was safe. Nobody saw her as she slid wraith-like back from where she had risen and lay down exhausted. But the morning had brought the awful truth to her—she had been lying beside a dead child. It was unbelievable and even now she tried to infuse the warmth of her own body into his.

Somebody was calling to her: "Hey, Kusum, aren't you going to queue up for rice?"

She shook her head, what was the use? They wanted to live but she had died last night, died when the last vestige of her womanhood had been torn from her. Who would want to carry this burden of shame for ever? She who had once been the loved wife of an honest ploughman—what was she now? With what anticipation her parents had named her Kusum or blossom; she was indeed a faded flower that lies upon a dung heap. Gradually everything had been stripped off her until she stood shivering in the nudity of her destitution. They had robbed her physically and morally. Her hard-earned rupees slipped from her grasp and fluttered on to the ground. Eyes that had been greedily

watching them slid a hand round clawing at one of the notes. Kusum spied it and dealt a hard smack upon the skeleton fingers, the man turned upon her with a foul epithet and retreated disappointed.

Kusum felt that she had to do something with the stiff little body in her arms. Still numb from the shock of her experiences and the futility of what she had done, she could not readjust her mental equilibrium sufficiently. Therefore still with the child in her arms she rose up unsteadily, and started floundering forward realising that it was up to her to act. She saw nothing and heard nothing of the squabbling and fighting over rice ; she looked on curiously detached. What was it all about? Why did they desire to live? What could they expect of life? Had they still some expectations? Then they were not like her, she was empty, her body was a husk out of which the best had been squeezed out. She staggered and nearly fell over a prostrate figure that groaned and writhed. Kusum looked about her and found that she had come away from the market-place, and the clamour of voices came in a muffled roar. She paused for a second to stare unseeingly at the form lying across her way, and then deliberately she picked her way and passed on.

Sukhi saw her go away, clasping a bundle of rags in her arms, and even though she cried aloud in agony nobody stepped near her even out of curiosity. Even in the midst of her pain she tried to cover her shame with



her inadequate rags. The searing pain had come on just after midnight had struck from some nearby clock, and it had lasted in spasms. Her husband had sat helplessly by her side until she had forced him to go and take his place in the queue. He had not wanted to leave her, but what good would that do? They had to eat, and she hated being a burden upon him at this time. She had been very near her time when they had left their village home, and her mother-in-law had said: "I don't think, *Bowma*, you had better come. You are very near your time and might have an accident on the way."

Afraid of being left alone Sukhi had said: "I am very strong, mother; I promise you I'll not be a burden upon you. And I shall starve if you leave me." Her children too had clung to her saying: "Mother, mother, you must come with us," and her husband had clinched all arguments by saying: "She can't be left here to starve. She is my wife; I shall take her with me." Her mother-in-law had muttered angrily that it was unseemly for a woman so far gone in pregnancy to come out in the open, but had not dared to interfere further. Since yesterday morning she had taken her two grand-children and gone exploring to another side of the city, and thus when the pain came on, Sukhi had been alone with her husband and his helplessness moved her to tears. She assured him that she was all right, that such pains were inevitable, yet she fancied she had seen tears in his eyes and







a grimness about his mouth. With his help she had staggered to the back of the market, away from lewd and irreverent eyes and sent him to his place in the queue. His work lay there and nobody could help her, and she had to bear her pains alone. But when they came in seering waves she dug her nails into the ground and beat her forehead. She screamed too, and even in the midst of her agony she looked round ashamed in case anybody had heard her. If they did, they had no time to stop and speak to her. It went on and the waves came in rapid succession and she felt she was drowning. Hopelessly overwhelmed, unaware of her surroundings, she just battled with the pain. Her mind was set that it must be combatted, beyond that she knew nothing. Gradually the mist cleared, her eyesight came back and she returned to reality and utterly worn out she wanted to sleep. But at the back of her mind there was a haunting thought that something more she had to do. Of course, she sat up hurriedly and experienced an emptiness, there was the child. She looked down, its breath was coming in pitiful gasps ; with experienced hands she slapped its buttocks and the infant burst out into a loud cry. Sukhi tried to pick it up in her arms, and found it was still attached to the cord. Wildly the woman looked round wondering what to do, and then like an animal she bent down and with her strong teeth bit it through.

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Like birds that seek their roost at sunset, the destitutes were returning to the pavement to take up their positions for the night. Shyama was one of them. Their one meal over, there was nothing left for the family to do but brood for the rest of the evening. The men sat back sullen, unsatisfied, hopeless, they somehow lacked the sturdy faith of their womenfolk. They hated themselves for having been reduced to beggary. They felt they were dishonest and chafed against it. The children had fallen asleep in the luxury of some ballast in their stomachs. Night was creeping in, soft-footed, soothing and comfortable. It brought a sense of friendliness in shrouding their destitution, it hid their wretchedness from the eyes of the world. Yet the feeling of surging turbulence persisted, and whispers sprang up all around. Shyama stretched her body on the pavement and a feeling of rest crept over her. A tiny breeze fanned her brow, and brought relief to the heaviness of her tousled and matted head. She slept. When she awoke it was with the touch of a hand on her legs, which she thrust aside. The hands were creeping over her, up to her breasts, fondling them, she cried out in horror. Her husband woke up with: "What is it? What's happened?" Sitting up she said: "I don't know, somebody was trying to paw and handle me." He looked round fiercely and ran after a shape stumbling in the darkness. The faint sound of a scuffle and oaths floated back to her and she held herself

taut until he returned : "The swine will have a bruised face to get home with now!"

Simultaneously came shouts from the other destitutes :

"For God's sake shut up!"

"Look after your woman—can't you? without disturbing others."

Somebody moaned : "Even at night we cannot be left in peace."

"Why don't they keep their rows to themselves?"

"The woman is to blame—bloody bitch!"

With a muttered curse and a warning they turned over on their sides and slept. Shyama clung watchfully to her husband's hand, shamed and mortified at her experience.

## SHE WAS NOT ALONE

GOURI was staring at the jasmine garland and thinking how cool-looking it was, how exquisite the fragrance as she wound it round her hair. Outside the monotonous and never-ending cry persisted: "A handful of rice—please!" "Just a cup of the rice-water which you throw away!" "Will you turn me away with an empty belly?" A child was returning from school with his books under his arms and through her window she could hear his small voice saying: "Would you like a couple of pice?" The woman with the wolfish look nodded greedily, the child rushed indoors and again she could hear his voice: "Mother, somebody has stolen my money from my purse..." and a woman's soft, ashamed voice: "It is I, I have spent it. What could I do?" The boy came out and with a quivering lip said: "I am sorry, it is spent..." The woman grimaced at him and spat out: "You liar!" and the child burst into tears at the injustice of grown-ups. Gouri wondered, would she have become like that woman? But was she any better than her—or a good deal worse? The clock struck five o'clock, the blazing sunshine had not diminished and evening seemed a far-off thing, but Gouri had to hurry for Ranjit *babu* always liked her to be clean when he came home in the evening. It was one of the first things he had impressed on her when



he had picked her out of the gutter and given her food and shelter: "You must always be clean, wear fresh clothes and look well. I shall give you all that you want." And he had kept his promise. She? She too had accepted her position, and at first the relief had been great, and she had been genuinely grateful to him for lifting her out of the hourly misery she had known. But thoughts—and were there regrets?—could not be kept at bay. She was afraid of the road and the pavement, they epitomised the world's cruelty to her, but what had happened to Nagen—her husband?

Gouri had been nursing her small baby—it was only a few months old—when he left her to queue up for food. He had said to her: "Remain here, I shall get enough for us both, because you are too weak to jostle in the crowd." The free kitchen was some distance away, and she had been scared of being left behind. But he persuaded her to stay, and that was the beginning of all the horrors. Under the shelter of his arms in spite of starvation she had not been afraid, but when evening fell and he did not return panic seized her. Her companions of the road had little consolation to offer, some said: "He's been run over."—Others that he had run away from them and yet more who said "Perhaps he's done something and been taken up by the police." Gouri felt that none of these statements were true, yet as days passed she had to accept one of the alternatives as correct.

Tears. tears. tears and more tears until

whatever she had was drained out of her and she stood up ragged, dry-eyed, with a child that suffered from continuous diarrhoea as if his intestines were also being drained away. There was no food she could get for him, and her own breasts were stone dry, so she fed him with small mouthfuls of the gruel she received and speeded him on the way to death. Even now she covered her face with horror, and sweat poured from her as she visualised the sequel of those days. The hourly struggle to get food, her voice hoarse, her clothes torn and the baby's life ebbing away—she was as one possessed—squabbling for food with others, scouring garbage tins, even fighting off dogs for a scrap. Then it had happened—just outside the free kitchen. Hunger had been tearing at her, she had been unable to get food for two nights and a day, not even a bowlful of rice-water. It was as if some ogre were trampling about inside her, she was bereft of all sense except the sting of hunger. Mechanically she held the baby in her arms; suddenly somebody screamed: "Food!" and there was a rush. She must get to it somehow, the desire to live was urging her faltering legs to join in the fight for food. Blinded by all save this urge she ran, unmindful that she had laid the baby down on the ground. At last with a bruised and scratched face she secured the food, which was gone into her belly in a trice. The ogre was quietened and then realisation came to her: "The baby! Oh, God, where is he?" Stumbling, running, she found the



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place where she had left the child—and there he lay, blood streaming from his face, badly mauled by a pariah dog. Gouri fell snarling upon the animal and he bolted through fright. She picked up the baby, it was lifeless and gone from her.

After that she was not aware of much for sometime, her last anchor had been taken from her and she floundered blindly on. Even now she was not clear as to how she had taken the first step—but she found that there was an easier way of obtaining food. She would stand by a tramshed and there were always people who cast greedy eyes upon her still youthful body, and she was amazed that her matted hair and filthy rags which exposed rather than hid the contours of her body, did not deter them from making propositions to her. First it was four annas and eight annas, but with it she could buy food instead of scrambling for it, then when she had secured a cleaner sari, and a cast-off blouse to put on herself, and had oiled her hair—she was no longer a beggar but was on the market.

It was thus that Ranjit *babu* found her. He was returning one evening after a successful day at his rice godown, when he saw this buxom creature standing by the wayside. Business had been good, the rice he had hoarded for so long had been purchased by a merchant at an extremely high price. Of late money had been flowing into his pockets, and if only these wretched Japs kept off for a bit, he'd make enough to retire to his home town.

Therefore in the exuberance of his heart he bestowed a smirk upon the woman, and she, who had learnt all the brazenness and cheek of her trade, smiled boldly back. Quite taken aback at such a reply, Ranjit *babu* had scuttled away, lest he become the cynosure of eyes. After all he was a respectable tradesman, who had given for relief work, and he could not have truck with a street woman. But she had been an attractive piece of goods—and some days later in the gathering dusk he had come up behind her and tapped her lightly on the shoulder. By that time Gouri had become quite used to such behaviour, and with her hand on her hips she faced him: “Well, well, and what do you want?” “You have a pretty blouse there,” Ranjit *babu* said nervously.

“Have I?” said Gouri; “I could do with a better one.”

“Could you, my dear? I can give you clothes and even jewellery if you are a good little girl.”

Gouri laughed harshly—good? It was a word she had deleted from her dictionary, but turning to him she said: “I’ll be good to you as long as it suits me—but what do I get for it?”

“You are a smart wench,” he said. “Well, I am willing to give you a home, clothes—everything as long as you please me. Is that not enough?”

“For the present, yes. When do you want me—now?”

"No, no," he said nervously. "Here is my address, it is not far from here. Come there to-night." Gouri sneered: "Afraid of being seen with a street woman, but not afraid to go to bed with her! Anyway—it suits me as long as I find food, shelter and money at the end."

Ah, there he was even now turning the corner towards his love nest—love! laughed Gouri bitterly, not much love anywhere but she had a good master. Anyway she hastened to tidy herself and open the door as she watched him elbow past the screaming importunate crowd. They swore at him, cursed him, and he returned the compliment by spitting at them. There was no room for his charity here where there would be no witness of it—always he must give with a flourish and a fanfare of trumpets.

Ranjit *babu* took off his coat, wiped his brow and washed his face in the cool water Gouri poured into his hands, then turning to her said: "Well, my pretty bird, how have you spent your day? Are you still contented in your nest?"

Yes, she was content, what more could she expect? He could not fill the charred remains of what had once been her heart; he wanted her body, therefore he nourished it as one does the sacrificial lamb, the only difference was that the lamb's torture was over in a trice and hers would persist as long as she lived. She had asked for it to escape from the horrors of the city, and she had got



it. Hers was not a complaining nature. She had made a bargain and she had no incentive whatever—not even the incentive of respectability, since it could buy her no relief from material wants and there was nobody that cared sufficiently to desire it for her. Nagen? He was the past; pot-bellied, self-satisfied Ranjit *babu* was the present.

Mechanically she took from his hands the necklace he was holding out to her—it was a paltry, stupid affair of paste diamonds and gold composition but it was good enough for her whom he had taken out of the gutter. He put it round her neck and his greedy fingers lingered over her throat and neck, they seemed to sting her as scorpions but she merely smiled and made her escape into the kitchen, on the pretext of making tea for him. When she came back with a steaming cup he was relaxing in the armchair and said to her: “You know, my love, I bought this present for you because ever since you have come into my life my business has been prospering.” Gouri had never been sufficiently interested as to how he made his money, it had been enough for her that he had plenty of it. Absentmindedly to-day she enquired what his business might be, and Ranjit *babu* was in a pleasant, chatty mood, so he explained: “When the price of rice was low, I had bought up immense quantities through my agents, and now I am selling at treble the price.”

“But how did you know that there would be a scarcity?” He winked at her and said:

"In business, little bird, scarcities can be made. Don't trouble your pretty head about it, but thank God that I have money that is enough for you, me and my family which is a large one."

But Gouri had once been an intelligent, practical girl, so now she whispered: "All these people, like us, have been made pawns in your game of buying and selling. People like you, who have no cares but to make money and hoard it, have bartered away the food from the mouths of our children."

Ranjit *babu* was annoyed, he didn't like to hear unpleasant truths, least of all from the mouth of his mistress. So he turned aggressively upon her and said, "What are you complaining about? If I didn't have money where would you be?"

True, thought Gouri, only too true. She was a vampire feeding on the blood of her own child, her husband, her brothers and sisters—this was her ghoulish existence. But if Ranjit *babu* had not dipped his hand into rice, would she be here at all? Would she not be still a wife and a mother as she had once been, the comeliest girl in the whole village? She had never thought things out before, she had never known the truth before—but it was too late now. She moved restlessly.

Ranjit *babu* was lying on the *taktaposh*. The day had been hot and wearisome, even the night was steamy and unfriendly. The rice and vegetables Gouri had cooked for him were cool and pleasant to the palate, he was so

intent on his own plate that he did not notice that she ate little or nothing. Somehow she could not swallow the food, memories and perhaps regrets were crowding upon her, choking her. The face of her dying child haunted her and she felt nauseated by herself, her life and the food. As this man, her protector and master lay on the *taktaposh* she sat on the ground beside him, fanning him. Soothed by the gentle breeze he had fallen asleep and tired out by her emotional upheaval Gouri slept with her head pillowed on his bosom.

When she woke it was with a start, and a sleeper's puzzled thought—where am I? There was the cry—it echoed from housetop to housetop: "My belly is on fire, for God's sake give me one morsel of food!" The voice, the tones—oh God, it couldn't be—he was dead. So they had told her, she cried in silent agony. Ranjit *babu* was asleep, she got up and moved by some unaccountable desire she went down the stairs and holding a lantern peered through the front door. Seeing a light the beggar came nearer; as one in a dream she lifted the lamp higher until it shone on his face and upon her necklace.

"*Má-gó-má*, I beg just a morsel of food." Gouri stood silent—this was the ultimate judgment upon her—it was Nagen. How could she forget the familiar lines of the face that had lain beside her night after night? Like a wraith he had come to her out of the night, and as one bemused she continued to

stare speechlessly at him. He mistaking her silence, said: "You won't give me food? I have been shouting for so long but nobody answers. They put out their lights and go to bed as if I did not exist. You too are turning me away?"

Gouri wanted to cry out: "My dear, oh, my dear, where have you been? It is too late now, too late." She wanted to run out into the road beside him, instead she took her own uneaten portion of rice and vegetables and emptied it into his grimy earthen vessel. As she was doing this she heard the clatter of Ranjit *babu's* slippers and then the angry tones of his voice: "What on earth are you doing here? Haven't I forbidden you to come down at night?"

Gouri looked from him to the beggar who oblivious of everything was licking his platter clean. She shuddered. Beside him again lay the horror of the road, the grime of reality and the mad scramble after food. No, no. She looked back into the shadows of the house where Ranjit *babu* and security awaited her. Once more the lamp light fell upon the necklace and it winked wickedly as Gouri shut the outer door quickly.

## THEY CAME BACK

OLD Nobu dug in his toes and refused to move. He raised his bony, shrivelled old hands to the skies and wept : "Where shall I go, deserting my paternal home? Here my father and grandfather died and here shall I die too. It is a thatched roof, but it is mine and I will remain under it. No, no I cannot go." The elders of the village pleaded with him : "Nobu, you will die here. There is no more food in this village, we are all migrating to the town, where rich people live and will give us to eat."

"Let me die here," he stubbornly said.

"But think of your grand-child Juthika, surely you will not condemn her to death too?"

Nobu was perplexed and thought for a while, then he shook his head : "Let her go with you people!"

The villagers raised their hands in horror and said : "A young woman, a widow, to go off without her natural guardian! Have you taken leave of your senses, Nobu?"

Juthika who had heard all this from the inside room, then came forward and said : "Grand-pa, I have no one but you, and you are right, let us stay. I would rather remain behind with you. Please, grand-pa, don't send me away." Conscience-stricken, Nobu said : "They have warned us that we will perish. Why child, you are young, you must live—"

"Live, Grand-pa?" Juthika replied bitter-

ly, "What life has a widow? Rather speed me on the way to another life—it is better."

So they remained, alone in that village of a hundred or more inhabitants, and watched the weird march of the peasants towards the city, as if some unseen piper was luring them on with his song of hope and promise. The young woman leaned against the mud walls of the hut and watched the exodus, even the dogs followed them. She had no regrets. Grand-pa would never have stood the journey, and she could not have left him to die by the roadside. She knew they were doomed, but she wondered how many of the others would return. And once more she felt that Grand-pa had been right that this *was* the better way.

Old Nobu's forefathers had been shoemakers by caste, but apart from the actual classification little remained to show his ancestry. To-day he was a peasant like any of them, and except on ceremonial occasions they rarely felt the difference. Sometimes when the *brahmin pandit* came round by his hut, he would stand outside while Nobu and Juthika did obeisance to him from a distance; or when the time for Juthika's marriage had come he had to seek out a suitable bridegroom of his own caste from the next village. But these things they accepted as inevitable, and at other times the village crowded round Nobu. They loved and respected him, and it was for this that to-day they had been so reluctant to leave him. Now they were gone, Nobu tugged at his empty *hookah* and pretended it

was full, to forget that he had not been able to afford the luxury of tobacco for a very long time. Even from the far distance, where his eyesight failed to carry him, he could hear the faint cry of voices receding, receding away from him. The companions of a life-time had gone, and he was alone in this little old village of theirs.

"We shall come back," they had cried, "when the paddy ripens again." Would they? And where would he be? Nobu had no illusions of what were the inevitable consequences of his act, but he argued that you cannot cut down an old tree and expect it to flower elsewhere—it must die.

"Juthi", he called out to his grand-child, "come here, dear, come and sit by me. The struggle will be great---". He felt her rounded young arms: "Has the struggle ever been less for us, grand-pa? Has it not always been a fight to survive? At least now we have the luxury of looking death squarely in the face, without wondering if there is anything we can do. For there is nothing. It is out of our hands." The old man stroked her sleek, black head and wondered at the wisdom of the young for he could not dispute it. But she was too young to die, his heart cried out against it and silent rebellion filled his soul.

From that day their lives were curious, as if they lived in a ghost village. The old man would wander round from hut to hut as if assuring himself over and over again that they were empty. Some days he would come





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back with a wooden toy that had been left behind, babbling in a lighthearted fashion. Their little store of rice was fast giving way, and the old man's withered skin seemed to be hung out to dry upon his bones. Juthika's eyes had lost their placidity and a look of fear sometimes lurked there. She often wandered by the tanks and quite composedly debated whether there was not an easier way out. But no, not as long as grand-pa lived. It was a strangely free, almost disembodied existence they led, never had the girl felt so utterly her own mistress. Occasionally she would look at grand-pa with anxious eyes, as he stumbled up the low plinth of the hut—he was becoming almost blind, want of food was robbing him of the priceless light of his eyes. It was now a question of one day the rice water and next day the rice—but for long long? Neither spoke of the cloud that was threatening to close over them. It was of their choice that they had decided to brave it. Their fund of stoicism stood them in good stead.

But the weaker the old man became, the more he would wander, nosing among the empty huts. Juthika looked on sadly and indulgently as one does on a half-witted child. It was the only thing that kept him happy, and in his imagination he saw the village as it once had been ringing with the laughter of children, full life humming round him, and always the mirage of women threshing the corn would flash before him like a lantern slide.

One afternoon, when the sun was sinking behind the old temple whose god lay forgotten and deserted, the old man came scrambling up in a high state of excitement. Juthika even now tended the household deity at the shrine of the *tulsi* plant, and was preparing to light the lamp with hands that shook, using up the last remaining drops of coconut oil. But the old man was calling to her, babbling, and would not wait. He was impatient, she must come over immediately. With a sigh of tiredness, Juthika went forward to humour him and he said to her: "I have found something, Juthi, my eyesight is feeble. Come and tell me, if what I have found is still alive."

She looked at him pityingly, and a tear dropped from her eyes to his wrinkled hand: "You are crying, child?" he gazed wonderingly, helplessly unable to understand the depth of her sorrow. "No, Grand-pa," said she wiping her eyes fiercely, resolving that she must not betray her suspicions only to shatter his world of illusions, "what is it?"

"Come and see for yourself," said the old man dragging her along.

In the darkening doorway of one of the huts, the old man paused, feeling his way forward. Juthika put a hand under his elbow and helped him on. They entered what had once been the home of one of the wealthier upper class peasants—Kali *babu* was well known to everybody. The family had been exclusive, but the deserted homestead told a tale of the impoverishment which had swept

over everyone until the slighter and more material differences had disappeared. It had been a shock when Kali *babu* and his family appeared on the same plane as they themselves, and had weeping joined in the exodus from the village. Evidences of opulence still glittered here and there in the construction of the hut, but it was empty, bare, and held out its hands to them like a sorrowful woman bereft of all that she holds dear. Vaguely Juthi wondered what her old grand-pa was doing here, but pattered after him docilely. His excitement was growing as he drew her into a side room and she stood still by the doorway wondering fearfully if delirium had also seized her. It was a macabre spectacle in the fading twilight—the wizened old man and the emaciated young creature alone with the prostrate body of a man. The closing in of night had brought with it a feeling of aloneness—the last inhabitants on an earth doomed to destruction.

“Does he live, Juthi?” murmured old Nobu.

Still unable to adjust herself to the reality of the situation, she knelt down mechanically beside the body and put her ear to his chest. Nobu watched anxiously. A stirring, and a long drawn life not quite extinct. “The grand-pa. Shall I get it?”

“No,” said Nobu, “let’s hut and we can look after him.”

“Who’ll move him,

Juthi vainly. "You are too weak and I too am not as strong as I used to be. It will only be a horrible affair of pulling and pushing, and he might die in that skirmish. Let me fetch our necessities—and they are not much—so that we can live here and look after him." It seemed so important to her that he should live—why or for how long, she was unable to visualise. The immediate present was upon her. It had not been possible for her to tell whether that pale, shrunken body was that of a young man or an old man. Never once did it dawn upon her that it were kinder to let him die in his insensible condition, so primitive is the desire for life.

It was then that Juthika took to searching for edible roots, which she and Grand-pa baked over a wood fire and ate while the rice and rice-water was kept for their patient. At first it had seemed that the embers of his life had burned too low to be fanned back into a flame, and he remained for days utterly unconscious of all ministrations. But the two kept their vigil by his side day in and day out, it was an excuse which Juthika found for Nobu to sit still while she ventured out for water and for whatever she could find in the way of edible roots and leaves. Once she had protested against giving up Grand-pa's portion of rice but he had laid a hand on her head and said: "Child, old people like me are at the ebb of their lives. Slowly but gradually I am going out with the tide. That man is young, if he lives he may have a destiny to perform—

give him whatever we have. Out of our three lives mine has lived its full measure. Grand-pa must go, Juthi, and very soon now. You must be brave and face up to it."

When the man first opened an eye of consciousness, he was utterly bewildered and immediately relapsed back to unconsciousness. His next spasm was longer, and after staring for a long time at the old man and then at Juthi's pale beauty he whispered feebly: "I thought everybody had gone": then as if struck by something he agitatedly tried to sit up only to fall back helplessly. He smiled weakly and said: "I am keeping you back—amn't I? But I am feeling much better, so do go, don't wait. You might catch up to them."

Juthi uttered never a word, but Grand-pa said: "There's plenty of time, my son, we'll catch up to them all right. Don't you worry. The quicker your recovery, the sooner we shall be on the road. So you make up your mind to get strong," and to himself he added: "How? And for what?"

Gradually, however, strength came to his limbs and one day he told them that his name was Sashi, he was old Kali Kinkar's son. But it was as if he had been rejuvenated from Grand-pa's life blood for from the day he first sat up Nobu took to his bed. At first the old man pretended it was because of his eye-sight but when the truth could no longer be concealed he called Juthi and said: "Darling, don't cry. There's a good girl. I have grown

old, we must all go the same way. Be brave. I wish I didn't have to leave you."

The girl just wept: "Grand-pa, oh, Grand-pa—don't go. Don't leave me."

"I am not gone yet," feebly murmured the old man, "there is life in the old dog still," but no longer did he take those roots and leaves she boiled for all of them. He was content to sip a little water and lie down.

One day Juthika had just finished filling her pitcher when she spied the first vulture sitting motionless and greedy upon the coconut tree. It was watching, waiting for what? The full horror of it rushed upon her and the pitcher dropped from her hands breaking into a thousand pieces. She rushed indoors crying: "No, no not that. I can't bear it—I can't. Grand-pa! Oh, Grand-pa!" Sashi met her at the doorway, he could just hobble about: "What is it? What's happened?"

Sobbing, frenzied she said: "I have just seen a vulture sitting, oh, so patiently, upon the coconut tree." White to the lips he exclaimed, "Vulture! What do you mean?" She whispered: "Grand-pa!"

"Oh, God!" cried Sashi and flopped down, while Juthika ran indoors and flung herself beside the old man, feeling him with her hands. His feeble voice came to her: "What's the matter, dear? Silly girl, your face is wet with tears. Stupid!" he chided.

"Grand-pa dear, do get well and strong," she implored. He just smiled and said: "Don't be afraid, darling; Sashi will now look



after you. He is young and will get strong. I am like a lamp whose wick has burned low.”

Grand-pa's thin flame of life blew out with the dawn, with the first rosy smear that was drawn across the sky. As Juthika wept silently by his body, Sashi hung round her awkward and shy. At last finding words that rolled out impetuously he said to her: “Why did you try to save me? You fed me with the food he should have had and now he is gone.”

Juthi looked up, a wan smile on her lips guarded by twin tear drops on either cheek: “He found you, he wanted it so. I knew that this had to happen—but you see he was all I had. Now he too is gone. I cry only in the selfishness of my loneliness.”

They cremated old Grand-pa, by the side of the streamlet that ran along the foot of the village. Laboriously with many stops they carried the body, and the vulture followed them from treetop to treetop—silently watchful and always waiting. But Juthi was passionately determined that the bird would not get its prey this time, and therefore with her own hands she lit the funeral pyre and watched the little old body crumble to ashes. When they returned—they each looked at the other with a new curiosity—what now? The oddness of their situation did not dawn upon them. They were fellow-prisoners in the condemned cell, and those who are face to face with death value the daily details of life far more than those who have a whole life-time to live. For them the sunrise spelt yet another day of life

allotted to them, and night brought a thankful feeling that a whole day had passed in which they had been alive. This gracious appreciation only comes to those who have not long in which to indulge in it, therefore they taste each moment of it passionately, gratefully. There was no time to think or for regrets, but a craving to have the present ere it be sucked in the bowels of the past.

There was something primeval in the lives which these two led. Uneatable food was taking its toll of their bodies, and they were little more than live skeletons. Yet Sashi with his tenderness often brought a smile to Juthi's lips and a light in her eyes. They had never consciously avowed their love for each other, that is for people who have to contemplate a long future. But at night Juthi crept in beside him, and felt thankful at long last to belong to somebody. How short a time they had, or the why and wherefore of things did not trouble them. Sashi would hold the touselled head on his breast and wonder if his parents had ever imagined that his bride would meet him at the gates of death and bring him back again. Who she was, what she had been, he never thought to ask her—Grand-pa had linked them together and he never sought to question further. What do such things matter to those who live in a slowly dying world? Very soon, they and all their ancestry would be mingled with the past. Yet they never spoke of death. When the hunger in their bellies created excruciating pains, they drank

a glass of water and clung to each other's hands. Or they lay wide awake in hunger, close to one another. So near were they to death that they sipped of life with cautious lips. Every night they wondered if they would see another day, and each morn they revelled that one more day of mortal companionship was theirs. In the meantime weakness of body was gradually claiming them; it was only their will and passionate desire to live that kept them going.

One such morning Juthi suddenly sat up and whispered "Voices!" and then sank back thinking "Oh, I am delirious." But they grew louder—of people wailing, and children crying. Fantasies were growing; at last unable to resist she roused Sashi: "Do you hear anything?" Sashi nearly deaf with hunger shook his head, and then said excitedly: "Yes, Juthi, I do. What can it be?" Out of the shelter of their huts they peeped fearfully and saw a ramshackle procession of old men and women with skeleton children entering the village. Who were they? dully they wondered. Somebody was staggering up the steps of the hut, an old, old man hobbling along, his stomach withered and caving. He stared at the two as if they were wraiths: "Sashi," he whispered, "His ghost!" Through lips thickened and parched the young man cried: "Father! It's me," and fell down. Juthi came painfully forward, and placed his head up on her knee, while the old man was outside calling wildly: "Hi, there, bring up whatever little food we

have. My Sashi is alive. It's a miracle! He only needs a little nourishment to revive him."

"Sashi?" cried his mother, "Can it be true? God be praised. But how?"

The village had come back. They went back to their homes, and Juthi went back to hers. Sashi was with his parents, he wanted her no longer. They had all come back, wrecked and destitute. Men and children lay dying in every hut, and there was an epidemic of dysentery. The vulture had been joined by its mate. She often wondered why they had returned. The paddy was slowly ripening, growing straight and tall as a young girl in her luscious youth—but those who would harvest the grain were decrepit, shaking. Yet even now the sparkle returned to their eyes as they watched the fields clothed in green and gold billowing away to the horizon. Juthi tended the little ones that were ill and their mothers out of kindness gave her something to eat—rice had come back to the market and the peasant sold the thatch over his head or his few remaining eating vessels to get it. Old Nobu was gone, so were his contemporaries and the young men had returned as old, thus had the stony-bosom'd city repaid them.

At times Juthi wished that she had died before this return took place, for Grand-pa had gone and even Sashi was taken from her. A vast resentment against the latter took possession of her, but one night when she heard a

light tap at her window and a breathless whisper: "I—Sashi—let me in", all her anger melted away in the vast relief that he was here. She opened her door eagerly.

"Did you think I'd forgotten, Juthi?" She was mute, and then for the first time he said to her: "I love you, Juthi, I love you. You gave me back life, it is yours. Always remember that." A new wonder filled her, and she repeated to herself, "He loves me. He loves me," as if it were the strangest thing of all. They never spoke of marriage, perhaps they forgot, and in each other's nearness they spoke only of love. It was as if they were seeing each other properly for the first time, and as man and woman had only now become aware of one another—in the supreme consciousness of that all else was lost. Everything was drowned in a glorious cascade of light, where the moon and stars showered silver confetti upon them, a hosanna of angels sang in their ears and this world was filled with the primeval wonder that has ever bound man and woman together. They watched another dawn, full of hope and life for them, steal across the threshold of night ere Sashi could disentangle her clinging hands with whispered promises.

But the morning brought a torrent of disasters for them. Sashi's father said to him: "Is it true that that shoe-maker's granddaughter is your mistress?" His reply: "No, my wife," taunted the older man to say: "Do you not know that she is a widow?"

"What of it?" cried Sashi, "She gave me back my life, it belongs to her."

"I shall never allow it, Sashi. Firstly a woman of low caste and then a widow! Never will my family name be smirched in such a way." Sashi only smiled and watched him stalk out of the hut.

The priest was speaking to Juthika as she listened with her head lowly bowed: "It is a sin for him to be with you. You are doomed for having allowed another man to attract you physically, but surely you wish to save *him*? You are the daughter of a shoemaker by caste, he belongs to another and higher class. Do not commit such a heinous crime."

"Crime?" she queried and her heart repeated over and over again the rosary: "I love him. He loves me. In the midst of death we found each other, we found life—why should anybody come between us?"

"Yes, a crime," persisted the priest, "and a sin. Better leave this village before another day is out to do your penance at some sacred shrine. Perhaps then you will not be accursed in a hundred succeeding lives."

Juthika shuddered.

The women pitied her, but looked at her fearfully as people must have done at Mary Magdalene at the feet of Christ. They felt sad that one so young and so fair should be so condemned. But after all she was a mere shoe-maker — untouchable — by caste, she should have had no truck with old Kali *babu's* son Sashi. They had so soon forgotten that

life and death set little store by the pettifogging values of man. In the midst of their humdrum existence they had once more surrounded themselves by the little things, the cruel things of life.

Juthika wandered by the stream where she had laid old Grand-pa to rest. She knelt on the soft brown earth, and begged his forgiveness if she had done anything that was wrong. But she knew he would understand. Had he not told her that henceforth Sashi would be her guardian? She knew that she must go, that the laws of village morality would make it impossible for her to continue in the hut where she had been born. What prevented her from taking her own life? She thought of how near to death she had been. From the remotest shades she had been forced back to the living and now that precious gift she could not squander in petty revenge. There was the road, it called to her, it was friendly, it did not frighten her. It was just a thin, red ribbon of a road but a comfortable, companionable road. She would put her foot on it and trust to its friendliness to take her on and on. She was no longer afraid.

A voice behind her said: "Juthi, where are you going?" Stifling a sob she replied: "Away, along this slip of a road. It has such an enchanting voice, full of promises." "Why?" said Sashi sternly. She had no reply. What could she say to him? Not the truth, neither could she lie. "I know," he said quietly, "they

have told me. Why are you leaving me, Juthi? Your grand-pa left you to my care."

"They will make life hell for us if I stay, my dear, let me go. It is better this way."

"Dear one," he said tenderly, "I do realise that. But I belong to you—don't you remember that you brought me back from the gates of death? Nobody has any right to debar us our happiness—after all," sternly and rigidly, "*they* left me as dead."

Juthi was smiling now but tears blinded her as he took her arm and said: "Yes, it is a friendly, promising sort of a road. It will help us on, I feel. Come, my dear, we must be on our way. Goodbye, Grand-pa, I know you are happy and are at last at peace."

The red gold afternoon shed its benison upon their upturned faces.



## TWO SISTERS

ALMOST four months had passed since the two brothers had left. As Amina watched the fishermen bringing in the catch she wondered at the normality of life in the midst of confusion and worry. The little fishing village hung over a ledge on the coast-line, where the river widened treacherously away. The men had been out all night—it was the *hilsa* season. It was true, Amina admitted, that the number of bobbing lights upon the river had been of late very much less, yet, there were people who carried on as before, only her husband had gone. That he was one of a fairly large number who had also left their paternal roofs, mattered little to her so lost was she in her personal tragedy. Resentfully she thought how there were wives who had their men beside them; why was she picked out to suffer loneliness and craving? She wanted him in every way, but she had been powerless to keep him beside her.

The village with its drab huts, nets drying in the sun and the stink of fish spelt for her all things familiar. Her father, and his father before him, had earned their livelihood on the bosom of the river, which cradled the village in its expansive embrace. For them it was maternal, and they worshipped its waters. It could be cruel too when swollen with the rain it would threaten to engulf all that they pos-

sessed, but even while they watched it fearfully and vigilantly there remained the thrill that they belonged to it and it to them. Even when Amina's brother had been caught in a summer storm, and his boat had been upturned, they never blamed the treachery of the river which at one time would draw them sweetly and tenderly to her bosom and at others like some ghoul rise up and fling them from her. Her mother had wept much and cried out shaking her fist towards the river: "Vampire! Ghoul! You've taken my first-born." But her father had said sternly: "Hush, woman. It is thou who art evil speaking thus of the mother who gives us our food. It is fate; curse thy fate, woman." On this belief and love the fisher children had been brought up, and for them their world did not extend beyond the river nor landwards beyond the precincts of the village. From the time that Amina could toddle she had learnt to mend nets for her father, and she would fascinatedly watch him making new ones out of strong twine-like string. Thus when she became the wife of a sturdy young fisherman she brought with her all the useful learning that a fisher wife needs. She sighed as she remembered Ghulam's sleek, brown body naked from the waist upwards glistening with the spray from the river, smiling broadly, his eyes greedily looking for her as he brought in the catch with his comrades.

There they were coming in now, the early rays of the sun tipping the elusive sails with









gold. The river was calm and placid enfolding the newborn day within its ripples. Her sister Raziya came and stood by her as they watched the palpitating heaps of silvery fish raining like cascades into a waiting lorry to be taken for the military canteen. This had been their first contact with the tumultuous affairs of the world. Before that they had not even known very clearly where was the home of the English that ruled over them—somewhere beyond the seven seas, across the black waters. Then they had learnt vaguely of war, and from the placidity of their backwaters it had seemed remote and illusory. It was beyond the vision of their daily lives, so they just toiled on and on to get together a few coppers to buy food for their families. Quite suddenly this strange thing, this war, had leaped upon them as from behind an ambush. Lorries like shrouded corpses, hooded and mysterious, plied up and down the hitherto little frequented coastline. Soldiers—strange and alien—white and brown—pitched their camps not many miles away and the tramp of their feet came fearfully to the ears of the villagers. Everything was in confusion, and then gradually a real terror got hold of them and men in the seclusion of their huts warned their wives not to venture too near the military camps—one never knew what might happen, they were lone men; fathers sternly told their young ones not to stir out of doors too far afield; and women whispered together about the strangers who now surrounded them on all sides.

Fish no longer went to the cities, lorries and sleek and smug-looking contractors took them away to feed the soldiers. The fisher-folk did not mind very much, the money was there as before. Stricken with cupidity they would try to get better terms from the contractor but alas, they were no match for his smooth-spoken chicanery. Then had come the day when a moustached individual had turned up to requisition their boats—a general cry of distress went up, they would starve if their boats were taken away. They had no other wherewithal to carry on! But authority was inexorable and relentless, and half the total number of vessels were attached. Thus the two brothers Ghulam and Kader lost their fishing boat and became helpless. Idleness and unemployment stared them in the face, when war stretched out yet another tentacle towards this obscure village. It was then that their wives raised up their voices and wept, but the young men realised there was no other way. They joined the labour corps and from the shelter of their poverty-stricken lives emerged upon the highroads of a world that was being torn asunder by the rapacity of man, by the hand of Cain raised upon his brother. Of this they knew nothing, nor realised the motive, for them it meant food, wages, shelter in return for hard work. They were prepared to give of their strength, and thus the young men of the village left their homes, their wives and their old people. For them there was of course adventure but for



their wives there was loneliness, longing and sorrow. Some strange thing seemed to have come into their midst and torn their husbands from their arms. Sleeping and waking they longed for them, yearned for the closeness of their bodies and all the trivialities of conjugal life.

This bevy of young women were soon faced with a problem, and the longing for their husbands grew with it. Fear entered their lives. The price of rice was leaping about like a wild thing in chains, it was soaring, soaring, until even those whose homes had escaped the ravages of separation began to look wide-eyed with fear. A sternness crept about the mouths of the men and a sense of impending tragedy haunted the women. For lone women, dependent upon the pittance their husbands sent, the situation was tense and full of ugly possibilities. As Raziya put an arm round her sister and drew her towards their home, she suddenly felt afraid for Amina. She hated to have her wandering haphazardly by the riverside; true these were all their own people, still one never knew and there was always the contractor who looked at them in an ugly way. Raziya was the older and darker of the two, and somehow since their parents had died she had felt much older than Amina though there was a bare 18 months' difference between them. She felt protective even in small things and as Amina asked her: "Didi, what shall I cook?" in such a hopeless way

that it tore at Raziya's heart drowning her own sorrow.

"I think we had better keep the rice for to-morrow. Bake a couple of sweet potatoes. What were you doing out so early this morning?"

"Nothing, just wandering by the river and wishing that things were different and that he, my husband, might be coming home with the tide."

Raziya stroked her head and said: "Little sister, be patient. Some day all this will be over." A cynical laugh came from Amina as she went out to light the fire. Raziya shuddered. When their parents had married them to brothers it had been because she could look after the younger one—but she felt helpless to-day. So many things were overwhelming them and under this buffetting of circumstances they were growing more and more bewildered. They were being borne along on a drift, and she was so afraid of quicksands that might suck them in. At all costs she must not give way to panic, she must keep her head so that she could help Amina. She ached for the quiet wisdom and resourcefulness of her husband as much as she ached for him physically. It was a gnawing craving that longed for satisfaction, and she dreaded it, but it was always there. She wanted so much to seek his advice about Amina, about the general situation, and feel the bulwark of his strength beside her. But he had gone, gone with his laughing, jolly, younger brother to

seek their fortunes far way from home. She was alone and alone she must weather the storms that hung ominously near.

The situation developed day by day unobtrusively, until the gulf between what had been and what was seemed to have been leapt overnight. The fisherfolk had always been thrifty, had always endeavoured their utmost to eke out their scanty earnings, but suddenly this elasticity disappeared and things began to give way. They clung desperately to whatever had been and found it crumbling about them. They came in a body and begged of the contractor: "Give us rice and foodgrains instead of money." The contractor smiled and raised up his hands in horror: "Rice! Where shall I get it?" Miserably they turned away, that was the question they too had been asking. Another day he whispered to them: "There is rice—in the black market—if you give me the money I can get it for you—Rs. 40/- per maund." Feverishly they began to sell—eating vessels, boats, even fishing nets without thinking of how they were going to exist without their implements of trade. Recklessly they ignored the future and provided only for the present—the hunger in their bellies would not be gainsaid. Like a vengeful God demanding sacrifice, it wanted more and more. As in an evil dream, they sold and sold until one day they suddenly realised their improvidence and that they had arrived at the crossroads of destitution and death. No more they went out with their

boats—what use was their trade since it could not give them food? They stayed at home sullenly wondering what more they could sell. Honest fishermen, they took to scrounging round the military canteens picking up scraps and bits. The river called and beckoned, but it called in vain.

Raziya sat in their minute kitchen which was open to the skies. The thatch had bought them food for a week—food not as we know it—but morsels flung in to quieten the crunching of the bowels. Nevertheless it had helped to keep their body and soul together. As Amina came in Raziya tried to smile cheerfully, but her sister did not pay any attention. She was preoccupied: "*Didi*, what shall we do now?"

"I have been able to get some spinach, Amina. See I am just going to boil it."

"I know," she said "but what after?"

After? thought Raziya. That was just what she did not want to discuss. She was afraid of that *after*.

"There's always Malik Sahib!" Amina said shortly.

"Who?" inquired Raziya sharply. She did not like her sister's tone.

"The contractor," she flung at her sister dispassionately. "I can always get something out of him. Haven't you seen the way he looks at me?"

"Shut up!" shouted Raziya, "Don't dare to speak like that. Think of your husband, what would he say if he heard you? He'd hammer you to death."

"Why should I think of my husband anyway—what right has he to leave me behind and go away? They have left us to fend for ourselves, and they can't grumble if we take the easier path that brings us in something. What do they know or care for our condition?"—the younger woman cried out passionately.

"Little sister," begged Raziya, "don't lose your head. You would regret it so much when Ghulam comes back. We must try to keep ourselves clean for them."

"Don't worry, darling," said Amina smiling. "I'll try to remember everything. It's a little difficult if one's hungry— isn't it?"

But Raziya was not comforted, nor was her mind set at rest. She felt as if they were surrounded by wolves on all sides, waiting with lolling fangs. Soon it happened that she too took to roaming the countryside, searching for something to eat. Lately Amina had been quiet and not grumbled over much, but she was strangely saddened and tearful. Not once had she said that she was hungry, but her once round little face was long and peaked. As she wandered disconsolate, hungry and miserable, she heard a voice:

"Ah, Raziya Bibi, you are looking thin and pale like a ghost." Startled she looked up at the ingratiating face of Malik Sahib. Without a word she turned her back on him, but he followed her still polite and attentive: "You must often be hungry. If you were kind to me I could help."

She turned upon him: "Get out! I will have nothing to do with you."

"Quite unlike, your slut of a sister!" he snarled.

"How dare you? How dare you?" Raziya whispered fiercely.

"How dare I?" questioned the man with raised eyebrows. "You are a fool! But you too will go her way. Go and see what is happening near the canteens."

Sobbing to herself: "I won't believe it! I won't believe it!" Raziya stumbled away towards their hut. Standing within its four walls, she felt that a rocking world had once more stabilised itself. She felt the mud wall with her hands, put her tear stained cheeks against it and assured herself that she had not suddenly gone mad. It was all there, it spelt security even in the midst of hunger. Kader had left her here, and here she must wait for him. That devil was just taunting her, trying to provoke her with untruths.

When Amina returned she found her sister hugging a green and red checked piece of cloth, which she recognised as Kader's *lungi*. She stopped short, and felt as if she must collapse. Instead she went forward and said: "*Didi*, you have eaten nothing for four days. Look I have brought some rice and *dal* for you."

Rice? Yes, there it was, white and pearly. She held the bowl to her nostrils and smelt that heavenly smell of boiled rice. It was good, and without a word she began to eat.

With tears Amina watched her—she felt so old and so wise beside her elder sister. She was weary with the weariness of experiences. When Raziya had nearly finished—she remembered—had Amina eaten?

“Amina, what about you?” she enquired.

“I have eaten *Didi*.” Then there was silence as Raziya scraped the bowl. Amina was thinking, she always seemed to be thinking nowadays. Her head was all the time in a whirl. Quite suddenly Raziya said to her sternly: “Were did you get this rice? It is the rice that only rich people eat. Where did you get it?” Slowly Amina looked up, she was tired of prevaricating: “I went out begging, they gave me one bowl to eat, and I begged another for you.” Still unconvinced, Raziya asked: “Where?” “At the canteens!” There it was out. Raziya shuddered: “Canteens? Malik Sahib said—” Amina was silent before the accusation. Raziya shook her, and shook her again screaming: “Deny it, Amina. Little sister, tell me it’s not true.” Amina sat as still as a statue. “Oh, why did you do it?” sobbed Raziya. “Because I was hungry,” came dispassionately from the younger girl, “because I want to live, and I have nothing to sell but my youth and my body.”

“It is a living grave you have welcomed, Amina, instead of life. Would that you had died rather than accepted this existence!”

Amina had no retort, she was helpless. She knew her sister was speaking the truth.

Bitterness, loneliness and hunger had driven her to it, and after the first initiation she had found herself entangled in inescapable and vicious toils. And the fear of hunger egged her on. She knew that she had lost everything, yet she could not die as Raziya was doing. Her youth demanded that she live and pointed the only way. She had taken it. Amina was not remorseful, she regretted it but she could not deny that it was inevitable. Her sister's bitterness as she wept: "Would to God we had both died before this!" made her rebellious. It was because she had not wanted to die that she had done what she had. Suddenly she felt she couldn't bear it any more, the familiar walls were stifling her. She rose, and without a word walked out. As one in a dream, Raziya saw her sister disappearing into the fast gathering dusk, she screamed: "Amina!" and as a whisper from a lost world the girl heard her name wafted in the wind along the river's edge.

Lying night after night alone in the hut Raziya sobbed bitterly. Hunger kept her awake and memory prodded her with knives. She had failed, miserably failed. Amina had been left in her care, first by their parents and then by Ghulam. At parting the boy had held her hands and said: "Dear sister-in-law, look after my Amina. She is so young and flowerlike. She does not understand why we are going. She is resentful about it. You will help her.....will you not?" Absorbed in her own misery she had allowed



Amina to go out of their lives for ever. What would she say when the brothers returned? Once she had gone right up to the canteen, and had been shocked to find other wives of other men also waiting for food and holding themselves ready for hire. Seeing Amina she had rushed up to her :

"Little sister, won't you come home?" The girl had turned upon her : "What for? Can you feed me?" Stricken Raziya had crept away as Amina had known she would, and thus did not see the utter sorrow that welled up into her sister's eyes. "She is mad. She is a stranger." Raziya muttered to herself. Since then she had not seen the girl, and she was too busy trying to keep her own body and soul together. Often she would venture far a-begging for food, but invariably returned home somehow hoping that some day she would find Kader back. Always there was disappointment, always there was loneliness, and always there was this ravenous hunger which could not be assuaged by morsels. But days of despair crawled into months of hopelessness, yet Raziya did not die. She had become a shadow that hung wraithlike round food kitchens and the doorways of the rich, but her body clung tenaciously to life.

Summer had given place to monsoon. Rain fell continuously and monotonously beating upon the leaking thatch. The river was scowling angrily, when Raziya crept into the hut. The front door had long been gone, they had sold it off, so the rain beat into the

hut and Raziya found a dry corner and crawled into it. Sleep somehow never came these days, but she sometimes dozed and dreamt of the spacious days long gone by. Days that somehow seemed legendary and she would shake conviction into herself that she was indeed that woman who had once lived, loved and laughed. It was in such a moment that she heard a whispered call "*Didi!*" mingle with the sighing wind and die ere it fully reached her ears. To herself she said: "Little Amina. I cannot get her out of my mind!" and she shed bitter tears. Again she heard "*Didi!*" and this time Raziya wept aloud: "Amina is dead, her spirit seeks me." But it grew louder, vying with the buffetting wind that roared round the hut, until Raziya crawled out of the corner, and stood in the doorway shading her eyes, peering into the darkness. Yes, she said breathlessly, there was somebody groping about, and regardless of the rain or her own physical weakness she stumbled out across the muddy pools nearly falling over the figure that faltered and felt its way.

"Amina, darling," Raziya clasped her to her bosom helping her on step by step. The joy of seeing her sister again had chased away all other thoughts and fears. The girl was sobbing bitterly as her sister held her to her bosom: "Lie down, darling. Let me cover you with these rags. Rest, dear, and to-morrow we shall talk."

Amina smiled, that swift bird-like smile

and in the comforting darkness she fell asleep cradled in the arms of her sister, while the raindrops sang a lullaby outside. As dawn stole shivering along the drenched countryside and rose bleakly over the grey sky, light came into Raziya's hut and touched her eyes gently. She woke cramped and tired, yet happy in the remembrance that her sister was here beside her, but as she looked down at the sleeping face she shuddered. God! What had happened? Her laughing gentle-eyed sister had died, she held in her arms an old, old woman with wrinkles under her eyes, hollowed cheeks and matted hair. Amina woke as Raziya changed position and said: "*Didi*, I have not slept so peacefully for many a month. I have never realised that home"—looking round at the sodden and bedraggled hut—"could be so sweet." Raziya could not speak, she wanted to sob out loudly. Amina struggled to sit up and said simply: "I am dying, sister. I who wanted so much to live have within three months run the entire span of my life".

"No, no, you shall not die. Little one, I shall look after you, tend you, nurse you back to life; I will go out and beg for us both," cried Raziya.

Amina felt tired and old, her sister must be made to understand: "It is not starvation that is killing me, but the disease which comes to all those who take to evil and foul living." Raziya recoiled inadvertently in horror, and Amina laughed mirthlessly: "You too feel the

horror of it! It is not strange that you do, but what is so amusing is that they who lure you on to this path fling you back into the muck heap once they know that you have contracted this disease. They shun you, revile you and chase you away. 'Strange! Strange!' and the girl cackled hideously.

"Hush!" cried Raziya. "You shall be cared for, and I shall see that you are at peace. You might get well, little sister, by the time Ghulam comes home."

Her paroxysm of bitterness passed, Amina shook her head saying: "I shall die, and it is better that I should. Only let me die here in surroundings where I was loved and wanted. I don't want to die like a beaten pariah on the streets."

So she remained and Raziya scoured all resources to keep their two souls alive. The villagers who had sought the vicissitudes of cities were trickling back—to what? Completely bereft of all possessions, their own trade gone because they had neither boats nor nets to start over again, they were a piteous sight. The men bitterly reproached their own providence, and beat their heads wondering what they were going to do. There had been a good harvest, they had learnt, and so once more they had returned to their homes to find rice truly back in the markets. But how were they to buy it? What more could they sell? So old and young left the trade of their forefathers and sought other employment—even becoming coolies on the road. The river

flowed silently by, unforgiving and resentful of the apostasy. They had betrayed her and their patrimony.

One morning, it was almost noon, that Raziya came in laughing and crying by turns calling: "Amina, oh, Amina—they are back! I told you that they must and will return."

Amina's heart was beating, beating like an imprisoned bird against the walls of its cage, as she struggled to sit up whispering: "Who, *Didi*?"

Raziya cried out: "Ghulam and Kader. I rushed away to prepare you for their coming."

Amina could not speak. What was there to say? So she was not to escape her final punishment, she had yet to see hate and loathing cloud Ghulam's open, boyish face. Footsteps. There they were. Yes, at last, after months her eyes rested on the beloved countenance. Tears? Why now? There was plenty of time left for that. He was bronzed, and taller somehow, thinner too, bending over her, sitting beside her:

"Amina," he called, "Birdie!"—his pet name for her. She tried to smile, she reached out for him. He was receding from her. A thin hand searched vaguely to caress his cheeks, he tried to take her in his arms. She pillowed her head on that broad, comforting bosom and wordlessly crept out of life.

## IMPULSE

THE child was crying intermittently but without ceasing. A low-powered bulb encased in a paper bag to serve as a black-out shade threw indifferent light upon the room. A few books lay strewn in a corner and a pot of ink in another. A small boy had fallen asleep on the floor near his books. The night was stifling, and he was wet with perspiration. On the *taktaposh*, on grimy bed clothes, a man lay on one side fanning himself with a palmleaf fan, and the baby lay on the other still whining. Neither took much notice of the other. From the nearby kitchen came the sound of somebody at work. Outside in the lane there was deep black-out, and a clock in some nearby house was striking ten.

Durga came and hastily picked up the baby, holding it to her breast: "There must be something the matter with the child—he's always hungry," she said plaintively. The small mouth was pulling greedily trying to suck out the last drops; the child could not speak, if it could it would have told the mother that her dried up breasts did not quench either his hunger or his thirst.

Haran turned to his wife and said: "Perhaps you should give him cow's milk."

"Listen to the man! Milk is selling at eight annas a seer—how am I going to fit it into the budget. As it is, the children are









always hungry and unsatisfied, and you suggest that I add another mouth to the list."

Haran sighed and said: "Anyway, what about some food to-night? Bachoo has fallen asleep."

"Basanti is bringing it. There she is." Basanti was their twelve-year-old daughter and she was laying covers for the family on the floor, placing the plates before them and pouring out water in the glasses. She bent down and pulled the little boy up: "Get up, Bachoo. The food is here." Hungry and sleepy he started to cry, but there was one shout from his father, and he went sleepily to his plate. Haran sat down at the only *thala* they now possessed and stared at the thick coarse grains of rice that had been placed before him. The others had enamelled platters that were chipped. The baby had quietened down. Bachoo was still whimpering and complaining that he was too sleepy to eat but shovelling in his share of rice and *dal* readily. Only Haran had one thin piece of fish floating in a cup of gravy.

"This rice is full of grit and gravel, why don't you clean it properly?" he grumbled.

Basanti looked up frightened, it was her duty to do this. But her mother was saying; "We do so and wash it too, yet cannot get rid of the dirt, and in the process quite one *chhatak* of rice is lost in the seer."

Haran knew this was true, he got the rice from his office, he also knew that it was not enough for his family. He was given what

was considered mete for one person at cheap rates, and out of it they all shared.

"How I am to manage from to-morrow, I don't know. The *dal* is finished, and I have about just enough rice to last out for one meal to-morrow and pay-day is far away," Durga complained.

"Never mind, I'll see if I cannot get an advance from the *burra babu*."

Basanti was clearing the dirty plates, and heaping them near the tap in the courtyard. She was desperately tired, for she was now little more than a housemaid. She had been taken out of school because her father could neither afford the fees nor the meagre wages of a hired woman to clean up. Basanti had liked her school and her companions but her parents had decreed that she must now take the share of housework and with the baby she found this indeed overwhelming. Leaving the plates to be cleaned to-morrow, she spread a mat on the floor for herself and Bachoo. Her father and mother were already in bed, the baby was beginning his whimperings again. Clad only in a rough chemise she slipped in beside her brother and pulled the grimy patched bedcover over herself.

Haran woke up hurriedly to Bachoo's repetition of the multiplication table: "Six twos are twelve, six twos are twelve; six threes are eighteen—." He wondered what time it was, and he had no means of knowing since the only clock in the house had been pawned long ago. Outside in the courtyard Basanti

was cleaning the heap of plates and utensils. His wife was bathing, and the baby was asleep. Haran peeped into the kitchen, one *chula* burned dimly and on it some rice was boiling. Durga was just emerging from the bathroom when she saw her husband and immediately rushed upon him with her household worries: "The coal dealer says that coal is anything from three to four rupees a maund, and what is more he won't supply on credit. Even the cowdung cakes are not available for fuel, my little store of *gool* (cinder balls) is also giving out. . . ." Haran escaped into the lavatory.

On the way to his office he watched the long snake-like queue outside a controlled shop for rice, of men and women jostling, crying and pushing. At least, he thought, these people had no false sense of shame and did not care to hang on to the coat-tails of respectability but people of his ilk could not bear to stand in a queue or let his wife or daughter do it. He nearly vomited as he watched gaunt vagabonds screaming and fighting over scraps from the refuse heap, sucking the skins of vegetable and rotten fish. Faster he walked towards Clive Street, joined the procession of umbrella-armed clerical retinue but he stopped aghast before the sight of a man dying of hunger. Horrible contortions shook his body, his eyes turned yellow as with a last protest against the injustice of man he lay still. White and shaken, Haran arrived at the massive steps of the office where he was only a minor cog in the wheels of industry. He was a mere

ant among other ants in this vast hive of activity. But throughout the day the spectacle of the man dying before his eyes haunted him. He had seen men quarrelling over food, fighting for it, even depriving their children of it, but this was his first experience of actual death through starvation. This final expiation of an unknown seemed to carry on unspoken condemnation and judgment upon his fellowmen. It knit the entire picture into a compact study from which nobody escaped. How near we are all to each other in this, Haran thought.

The day had been tiring and obsessed with the nearness of death an unnatural fatigue had come upon Haran. Yet he was determined to cover the distance that lay between the business world and the prosperous residential quarters. He was going to visit his uncle. His mission was to seek a gift of rice. The Head Clerk had been kind enough to advance him two rupees—but from where could he buy the rice? Unless he stood fighting and jostling in the queue—what would his neighbours say? And anyway he had no time, and certainly his wife could not.

When he arrived at his uncle's residence, somebody was singing at a harmonium. Lights dimmed through black-out shades were burning in all the rooms, and the pleasant hum of voices came to his ears. His uncle, Naren *babu* was a prosperous pleader in the city, and greeted him effusively: "Hullo, Haran, it's after an age that we see you. How is the

wife? And the children?" Uttering suitable replies Haran made low obeisance before him.

"Oh, Haricharan," called out the master of the house to servant, "take Haran *babu* indoors and inform the mistress."

Haran followed him through clean and spacious corridors laid down in marble mosaic to the women's side where young girls in bright coloured *saris* bustled to and fro, maidservants with babies in their arms hushed them to sleep, and the pleasant sound of cooking came from the kitchen. His aunt who was stout and motherly said to him: "You look terrible, Haran, have you been ill?"

"No, auntie," he said. "I am all right. It's because I've come straight from the office that I look tired."

"My child, you must be hungry. Madhuri!" she called out, and a young woman full-bosomed and in the first flush of motherhood came forward: "Yes, mother, did you call me?"

"Here's your cousin Haran," said the old lady significantly, and Madhuri bent gracefully in obeisance before him. "Now go and get some food for him, while he washes and makes himself ready. *You* know the Haran . . . ."

There were so many things before the kindly solicitude of his ~~ate~~ greedily and ravenously while if in the quiet harbour of their ~~pr~~ knew what was happening abroad had that comfortable atmosphere

from a full life guarded from want and ugliness. Everything was beautiful with a spick and span beauty, that somehow infuriated him. Like a child with a clean sheet of paper he longed to put large ink marks across it. His aunt was asking him about Basanti: "How old is she? Are you doing anything about her marriage?"

"She is only twelve and young yet," he replied.

"Does she go to school? It's not like in our time. These days young men want them to have some education."

Haran could not tell her that he had taken Basanti out of school and that she was washing dishes now. Instead he hurriedly swallowed the food and became impatient to say goodbye. His mission remained unfulfilled, he had to tackle his uncle yet. Naren *babu* turned genially to him as he appeared: "Are you off, Haran? How do you find your aunt? Madhuri is looking well—isn't she?"

"Uncle," blurted Haran without preamble, "could you give me a loan of rice?" The old man stiffened, he did not like importunate relations: "Rice? It is easier for me to give you gold, my child, than rice."

"But can't you spare a little, we are in desperate need of it. Little ones, you know . . . ." stumbled Haran. The old man was shaking his head:

"Sorry, my dear fellow, but there is no rice to spare in this household. The economy which I have to practise—our fathers had

never dreamt of!" Haran visualised the well-stocked kitchen where he had just eaten, and longed to tell him that to-morrow his children would starve. The food he had eaten seemed to stifle his gorge, and he only said "Oh!" and walked away. He heard him explain to his visitors: "Poor relations are the devil! They seem to think that they can for ever parasite upon those who are better off. And you know how things are these days! We who had never eaten but the best and whitest rice have now at times to be content with an inferior quality."

Haran's face was burning, he felt sick. Why had he been there? Had he ever really hoped for anything? Yes, he had, because he had not realised at what a distant point these people lived from the reality of things. It surrounded them but could not touch them, they had the magic wand that could open all gates for them and thus they even built a bridge over the piling dead bodies around them, so that their feet should not have any contact with offal. The narrow lane where he lived seemed to have shrunk, and he picked his way cautiously over refuse until he knocked at his own door. He heard a sound of feet and then: "Just a moment, father," as Basanti undid the latch. How late it was he had not realised and in answer to Basanti's: "Where've you been, father? We were worried", he said, "I went across to Southern Avenue, to uncle's residence. Where's your mother?"



"She's lying down," replied Basanti. As he passed the cookhouse he noticed that there was no fire, nothing was cooking. Everything was quiet, only the baby was still whimpering. Haran wondered if it kept on in this way the whole day. How trying! "Hullo," he said to his wife taking off his office clothes. "Why are you lying down?"

"What else does one do on an empty belly? Where've you been?" Durga sat up. There were dark rings under her eyes as if some one had deliberately blackened them. Her collar bone stuck out. Haran was comparing it mentally with Madhuri's plump throat carrying a gold chain. Yet Durga had been such a pretty bride, almost beautiful with soft petal-like eyes, which now looked enormous in her thin face. Her round arms and wrists had been covered with gold ornaments, where now her fingers hung talonlike, suspended from a wrist on which a few glass bangles—the sign of her wifehood—rolled about shapelessly. The gold bangles on Madhuri's wrist had fitted so admirably on her sleek skin. His attention was caught and riveted by what Durga was saying: ". . . no rice at all. What shall we do? The children have had no food all day."

"I failed, Durga. I went to my uncle's to beg for some rice. They refused. My aunt gave me something to eat . . . ." he brought out with a rush and then ". . . but the *burra babu* has given me an advance of two rupees."

Durga made a grimace: "What good is

money? From where shall I get rice or *dal* or *atta*? I can't go to the controlled shops to queue up with the *bustee* women . . . ." then she stopped short as if thinking and muttered "Can't I?"

It might have been because Haran's hunger had been after many days well satisfied that he began to notice trivial things as the cobweb across one corner of the roof, Bachoo's tear-stained, inkmarked face and Basanti's immature form as without a word she crept into bed on an empty stomach. It was only the baby that registered any protest at all and made demands on the mother. Haran lay beside Durga and tried to fumble for her hand, she jerked it away—she was too hungry for sentimentality and did not want to have another baby. What could he do? Was there no escape from this, he wondered. Was he any use to them? Or would it be better if he committed suicide? He toyed luxuriously with this idea. The dead are insensible, they don't feel anything. There was an open road of escape—should he take it? He stilled all thoughts of duty or love for his family. They would be relieved of his responsibility, yet . . . . He fell asleep.

When he woke up, the sun was streaming in upon his face. The baby was lying asleep on his belly. Haran felt irritated somehow, as if he were being neglected. Basanti too had slept late and was sitting up rubbing her eyes wondering why her mother had delayed in wakening her. Of course, there was nothing

to wash up. She shook Bachoo awake, and he began to cry: "I am hungry, I want something to eat." Haran went out on to the slip of a verandah and called "Durga!" The lavatory was empty, so was the bathroom. Where could she be? A horrible thought came into his mind—perhaps she too had sought a way of escape? He hurriedly went back to where Basanti was rolling up the mat and putting it away: "Where's your mother?" he asked. "Mother?" the girl was surprised at the question, for where else could mother be but in the house somewhere? "She must be about." "She isn't," he almost screamed at her, "Go and look for her." Obedient as ever, the girl trotted away bewildered at this strange whim of father's. Mother was bound to be somewhere. What was all this fuss about? She climbed two flights of stairs to the terrace. Nobody there. She inspected the cook room, the lavatory and the bathroom. The alarm was spreading to her. Basanti was beginning to feel tearful and resentful. It was so unfair of mother to behave in this way, when they were all hungry. Her clothes were all there, and tearfully she told her father that mother was really gone. "Gone!" he screamed. "She couldn't have." Bachoo took up crying: "Mother, mother, she's gone!" "How could she?" wept Basanti brokenly. "I can't believe it," muttered Haran. "Durga? Have I really lost her?"

That whole day in the office was like a chimera to him. His brain was on fire, his

stomach empty and crying for food. The whispered remarks of people around him passed him by, until the head clerk's severity brought him to book: "What is the matter Haran? Your ledger is full of mistakes. You are being paid to work, surely you don't want to lose your job. I am warning you that you are heading for it." With a muttered excuse that he was far from well, he tried to focus his mind which kept on crying silently heart-broken—"Durga! Durga!" Why had she done it? Again he thought of the man he had seen dying of hunger, and he felt a strange kinship with him. His Durga had also gone the same way. In one moment the knot of thirteen years of life together had been cut, severed for ever. To-day every little incident of marital joys and quarrels rose up and blurred his vision.

It was with a quickening pulse that he waited for Basanti to open the door. Perhaps . . . . . He asked breathlessly: "Any news?" She shook her head hopelessly. Haran noticed that the baby was clinging to her like a limpet, too weak to cry any more, tearless sobs tore at his little body. Bachoo was sitting in one corner and whining "Mother, I am hungry." The little apartment was closing in upon Haran, and he could not bear the accusing eyes of his children. He took to pacing the lane outside—always hoping. People were hurrying home, women were returning from the queues. Night was falling, rapidly, shutting out the mouth of the lane from Haran's

eyes. The houses became gradually shrouded in darkness, in gloom, as if a panic-stricken city was cowering under the welcome shade of night against some horrible fear. Shaded lights, like the vacant and dull gleam in half-blind eyes, popped up all round. Everything was shrouded in a panic of war, fear and hunger. Haran could still hear Bachoo's wailing monotone and wondered mechanically how he would ever cope with this family. Would she really never come back? he helplessly floundered. Again and again he asked himself: Why had she done it?

The darkness of the night was deepening, there were no street lamps. Haran felt strangely alone and shut out. Basanti called: "Father!" fearfully as if afraid he too had deserted them. There was no reply. He wanted to disown them, be alone in his sorrow. Still he paced up and down the lane to quieten his mind by physical exertion, when somebody tumbled against him and said sharply: "Who's that?" Something leapt in Haran's throat. The woman's voice again said: "Who is it? Get out of my road." At last, the mist was clearing in his brain, he whispered hoarsely: "Durga? Is it really you? Where've you been?"

"Of course it's me," she said robustly. "Come inside and I'll tell you everything."

Dimly he could see she was carrying something in her hand. "What is it?" he asked humbly, somehow he felt she merited his apology. "Rice," said Durga triumphantly.

Basanti stared at her mother—yes, it was her mother but she looked like a beggar. A torn, filthy *sari* was wound round her, her face was scarred and bleeding but in her eyes there was joy and triumph. Haran suddenly felt afraid to question her. The baby with a last flicker of energy began to whine uproariously, while Bachoo clung to Durga sobbing: “Mother, mother, you are very naughty and cruel. I am so hungry.”

Durga caressed and soothed him saying: “Just a few moments, darling, while I give baby a feed, and then you shall have hot soft rice to eat. Basanti, light the fire, there’s a good girl.” Turning to her husband she said: “I knew you would be worrying. But there was no other way.”

“What do you mean, Durga? Where have you been, in this garb, looking like a beggar?”

“To the control.”

“To the control!” repeated Haran.

“Yes,” she nodded. “I had to become like one of them, so I wore this filthy rag and went before dawn to sit in the queue. Even then I was quite far back. There were hundreds of women who were sleeping there outside the grain shops, to be among the first for the morning’s distribution. Unfortunately the store of rice finished before my turn, so I had to wait till the shop again opened in the afternoon. Then I had a fight and lost my place. That’s where I got these scratches. But I pulled out a tuft of that ruffianly woman’s

hair! A kind man in the opposite queue got me back to my position, but lost his own place. I knew you'd be wondering what had happened to me, so I was hurrying back."

Haran was gazing at her: "How could you, Durga? How could you? You, a respectable wife, fighting and squabbling with slum women! Have we gone down so far?"

Durga was sorry for her husband. His respectability had been hurt, but before the hunger in the eyes of her little ones every other consideration had vanished.

"My dear," she said gently. "There is no caste or class among the hungry," and with this slight rebuke she went towards the cook-house.

Haran's *amour propre* had been horribly scarred. This had seemed to him the last stage of degradation, when his wife, born and bred on traditions of sheltered wifehood, had to put aside her natural shame to go and line up with slum women, even fight over a bowl of rice with them. How had she done it? How had she overnight discarded the voluminous etiquettes of a middle-class woman as a worn petticoat and clad herself in strange and new codes? Had her respectability meant nothing to her?

The enticing smell of boiling rice floated up to him, it filled his nostrils, his entire body with a sense of well being. He saw interest leap into Bachoo's eyes as he rushed into the kitchen. There was a gentle rattling of the door knobs. Haran went to open it and saw

a middleaged man standing hesitantly on the doorstep. He was a stranger.

"Who are you? What do you want?" demanded Haran.

"I—I—am afraid you don't know me. Your wife—the lady who just came in . . . ."

Immediately Haran was convinced that this wretch had followed Durga, had expected her to be alone, for his desires. He was infuriated.

"How dare you?" he cried, "How dare you?"

"B—but she to—told me . . . ." stammered the man.

"You liar. Get out. Don't you know that she is my wife?"

"I—I—" but before he could finish what he had to say, Haran had flung him out into the street and shut the door with a bang on his face. The blood was racing up to his brain.

"What was the noise?" enquired Durga.

"A man had followed you from the queue. This is the result of your shameless behaviour," Haran raged.

"Don't be a fool," cried Durga. "Where is the man? I asked him to come here."

"*You* asked him to come? Am I going mad?"

"I think you must be," retorted his wife. "He was the man who kindly helped me to get my place in the queue, and incidentally lost his own place. As he had twice missed the distribution and had not eaten for two



days I asked him to come here and promised to give him some of the rice we cooked for ourselves."

"Oh!" said Haran flatly. "Where is he?" enquired Durga.

"I have chucked him back into the streets."







## THE ROAD

THE minarets of the mosque rose white and plump shaking themselves free of the hovels that clung to its skirts. An autumnal twilight was ebbing away in a rhythm of colours. The workers were returning to their *bustees*, and the prostitutes in the lanes behind were preparing themselves for the night which lay ahead of them. The fire from the *chulas* gave scanty light as grimy babies crawled upon the mud floor and voices of urchins at play by the roadside gutter rose shrilly. Piercing this atmosphere of sullen toil and drudgery rose the *azan* as the venerable *mullah* turned westwards and called the faithful to prayer. There was a moment's curious upliftment as the call resounded over grey roof tops and an illusion of emotional peace drenched the world. The prostitutes paused in their toilet immeasurably and unaccountably uplifted. The call to worship hung upon the air and it claimed each and every person. The old voice quavered into silence as a gentle breeze loses itself among the tree tops.

The bridge was little used, it spanned a *nullah* on the outskirts of the city that was getting rapidly silted up and under it cowered the destitute refugees from villages. They too heard the breath of the *azan* linger over them as a benison and momentarily it took them away from the eternal contemplation of their

misery. Even Kali sitting dry-eyed beside her husband's dead body was lifted beyond herself. The night they had been long awaiting was imperceptibly drawing a curtain across the vision of the world, across these watchful eyes that were ever on guard against the persistence of destitutes. For a long time now it had protected them, and under its shade they had ventured forth in search of food. By day like wild animals they hid themselves in their lairs, crouching silently lest a whisper betray their whereabouts. They had developed the cunning and guarded watchfulness of wild animals. The thick greyness of twilight was becoming an opaque blue-black night. Starlight threw dim and fitful shadows. No other light penetrated into their place of refuge.

There were whispered discussions, signs of activity, as cautiously they came out from under the bridge and climbed the bank of the *nullah* and once more set their feet on the road. Somebody was calling: "Hist! Kali! come on. There's no time to lose." She looked back—that sprawling body seemed to have grown unaccountably remote. For a second she watched it detachedly and then turned away to join the silent procession. They crept along slowly, painfully but determinedly along well populated areas, prosperous residential quarters where people were just turning out their lights for sleep unmindful of the ghostly tribe that was on the march. Silently, purposefully it wound its way. A

child cried out, the mother clapped a hand over its mouth and hurried on; an old man faltered two others beside him helped him on step by step. Fear which transcended hunger was driving them on towards the road which had shown them the way to the city. Like sheep driven out they were seeking that very road to retrace their steps.

Once out of the city they paused to look back fearfully over their shoulders. It lay there below them throbbing, palpitating, forbidding. They had once hoped to find a welcome and rest there, instead they had beaten and bruised their heads and hearts against its stony pavements. Night had pulled a black cap over the eyes of the city, but its passions and tragedies still skulked under cover. They who had come with expectations had found themselves as babes in the wood in a petrified forest. The gaunt houses threw strange shadows upon the road ahead, and remained aloof, cold and significant. It seemed as if the city stood apart and watched this exodus coldly, it never stretched out a hand to detain them or help them on. There was something strangely gloating that at last they had been driven on. It had never taken kindly to their cries for food. It had been resentful of the invasion, the disturbing of the placidity of its life. To-night it watched them silently, even exultantly, as they once more set their feet back towards whence they had risen. They had been but the spectres of a nightmare that had haunted the people of

the city, and now they had been conjured back to whence they belonged. The city would once more be free to-morrow.

The band of vagrants pressed on falling in with another crowd, until with ragged bundles they lined the road and trudged on as if determined to put an appreciable distance between them and the city. Dawn was swelling from pale amber to rose, and lay in palpitating streaks across the soft blue sky. A tinge of cold in the air made the half-naked procession shiver and draw closer to each other. Their feet were torn and bleeding as they paused to rest by the wayside.

Kali was wondering why she was returning. The city had taken all that she possessed from her, and she had even left her husband's body behind to be a prey to jackals. The woman beside her was crying softly. Kali impulsively put an arm round her, and she burst out into loud sobs: "My little one! I had gone to the canteen for some food for him—he was ill with fever and I had left him lying on the ground under a tree. When I came back he was gone, gone . . ." she sobbed. "The people nearby said that the police had come in a lorry and taken him away, that he had cried out aloud for me and that they had collected a number of women and children all of whom were wailing and beating their heads. I miss my little one so, he was the only one I had left. And him too they must have thrown into the river. Is that true, *Didi*? Do they really drown them?"



One of the men who had been listening, said: "God alone knows, sister, but the tales are fearful about what they do to people they take away. Some say that they are left in the jungles to be eaten by beasts of prey."

The women shuddered. It was stories such as these that had driven them away, and had they not themselves witnessed how people had been dragged into these lorries and been driven away? There had been no kindness in their handling of destitutes by uniformed attendants. They had been treated just like unwanted pariah dogs.

They took up their journey again. Old Yusuf Mea was hanging on to his grandson Yunus, and somehow hobbling along. He was muttering to himself: "At least there will be a roof over our heads, and nobody can drive us away from there."

"But I want my mother . . ." the youngster was crying. Old Yusuf had no reply, for one afternoon he and Yunus had come back from their search for food to find her gone. It seemed she had returned early from the canteen and had lain down to rest, when people had forcibly pushed her into a waiting lorry. She had screamed and tried to jump out. They had tied her with her long hair to the benches. "Perhaps you will find her at home," he consoled falsely. "Shall I, grand-pa? Really?" the brightness in the child's eyes smote the old man's conscience. He could not repeat the lie.

There were always feet moving upon the

road, line upon line, young and old but tired and footsore. On and on. Someone faltered, fell. The procession stopped. They crowded round him: "Who was it?" "What had happened?" The man was retching fearfully and his body was writhing in pain in the dust of the road. Somebody whispered, "Cholera!" Another said, "It is Suru Pal from Lakshmi-kantapur." They looked awkwardly at one another, and then slowly began their march. There was nothing they could do. Suru Pal's wife with a baby in her arms and a toddler clinging to her skirts paused undecided—what was she to do? He was dying, but she wanted life for her children and herself. She took a few steps forward and then back, his parched lips were whispering: "Ambu! Ambalika, water!" Remembrances of a lifetime tugged at her, but she did not want to stay. To remain meant certain death. Yet how could she leave him? He opened his eyes, eyes that were already darkening and muttered: "She too has left me. She's gone." Ambalika put the baby down on the road, the older child squatted beside where his father was fouling the ground and gravely watched her bringing water from a nearby pool. She knelt beside him pouring drop by drop on to his dried-up tongue, he looked up gratefully, smiled and faintly demanded more. The crowd was receding like a mirage in the distance, the sound of their voices came feebly.

Immersed in their own misfortunes nobody cast a thought back on Ambalika, or

what would happen to her. Their own hopes and ideas obsessed them. The road went on and on, leading them back—to find what? we have ever imagined ourselves in such a Old Yusuf wondered how he would find enough to keep himself and his grandson. He glanced at his friend Ibrahim, they had known each other for more than fifty years. Yet to-day each walked jealously aloof, guarding their thoughts as their dearest possessions. He called out to Ibrahim: "Could plight? Do you remember when we were young, how our fathers had told us that beyond the precincts of the village lay haunting tragedy and disaster?"

"Aye," sighed Ibrahim, "Yusuf Mea, I am now wondering how I shall live in a hut that has no roof. When I sold off the thatch I had never dreamt of a to-morrow, or a return, it was food that had mattered. The monsoon rain has passed over the hut—has it left anything?"

"Now as we set our feet homeward, we wonder why did we do what we did? For a peasant to sell off even a portion of his paternal belongings spells disaster, and we are paying for that. I remember when my sister got married," reminisced Yusuf, "nearly forty years ago, my father had got heavily in debt. He sold off our cow, and my mother had cried aloud saying that only evil would come of it. What would they think if they knew that I Yusuf had sold even my eating vessels to purchase a meagre portion of rice?"

"We are feeble and old, Yusuf Mea, we have lost our young and our sturdy ones, how shall we live even when we get back? At times I wonder if it would not have been better to have hidden in the city."

"No, my friend," said Yusuf vehemently, "even at this age I do not relish being thrown to the wolves."

Naran had been a weaver, and as he listened to the conversation of these two old people, he too wondered on what tide they were all being carried. Without much preparation they had decided to migrate to the cities lured by whispers of food, clothes and care, and now without any plans they were rushing back to their villages. Like reeds they were being bent hither and thither at the whim of the wild winds that were buffeting them. "What are we going to do?" spoken and unspoken this question lay athwart them. Naran had once belonged to a great community of weavers, who had fashioned *saris* and *gamchas* (countrymade towels). It was a profession handed down to them generation by generation, and once a year they had worshipped their tools, their looms and their shuttles. Even as a child he had learnt to differentiate between the warp and the woof. He sighed regretfully. One by one, shamefacedly each family had sold out or mortgaged their looms. There had been something freindly about the looms, and parting from them had been like parting from a trusted

freind. A feeling of betrayal had filled all of them, yet there had been no other way before the clamour of hungry young mouths. Now he had lost them too. His wife, who had all her life bossed him, had been the first to fall, and bereft of her care the children too had gone. Like landmarks he had left them on the streets of Calcutta. He had felt helpless after his wife's death, but as the scars piled up one after another tears had dried in his eyes. Hunger had driven out all sentiment. Somebody clapped a hand on his shoulder: "What are you brooding about, Naran?" he looked up into the almost unrecognisable features of Dhiru, who had at one time been his next-door neighbour. "Is there anything left for us but to brood?" hedged Naran.

"Doesn't the thought of home cheer you?" asked Dhiru.

"Does it?" countered Naran. The other was silent and then said:

"To tell the truth, I am scared. What are we going to do? Weaving is our trade, but we have neither looms nor yarn, nor money to buy either, why are we going back to starve?" Naran contemplated this question and then said slowly—"I suppose because it is home, because whatever security we have ever known has been there, and because we are hoping that our neighbours will help us since they will be working on the fields again." Dhiru felt relieved, Naran had given some interpretation as to why this senseless exodus. It was hope that had reared its head

again, only they were afraid to trust, afraid to look forward.

The ragged cavalcade had covered more than half the distance when night overtook them, and like birds at evening time they too roosted by the wayside. The women gathered dry leaves and boughs and coaxed a fire round which they huddled with their children. October was coming to a close and a real chill was descending of nights upon the countryside. The dew was heavy, and the children shivering snuggled up to their mothers. The men without a word stretched themselves by the roadside, morbidly wondering what was awaiting them. So long homeless, there was some cheerfulness in the women at the thought of their own firesides. What they would cook at them they never paused to think. They were women whose world at one time been bounded by their homely care on one side, the tank on the other where they indulged in gossip and laughter, the distant banana groves and the muffled sound of trains marked the boundary of their 'lives. Their joys had not been plentiful but they had lived in a back bay with few contacts with the rushing gushing world around them. Out of that they had been plunged into a seething mass of humanity at its worst, in the struggle they had been shorn of all niceties leaving only the primeval. They had been badly mauled and hurt. Therefore even in the midst of their afflictions they looked forward lingeringly to the thought of a return. Their

metamorphosis was apparent to the outsider, to one who could objectively gauge their degradation but within themselves there was a shy ardour of what had once been. In this flame they warmed and revived the remnants of their self-respect. Thus they spoke together in low whispers hopefully of life regained. The men marvelled at their psychology so utterly hopeless had they become, and pathetically wished that something or somebody would light a spark in their bosoms too. They lay back and stared at the starry sky enriching the black velvet of night. Diamond points glittered and gleamed, as they had done for countless years. They were not changed, only these mortals lying under their canopy had become ravaged remnants of their former selves. The stars flickered and shone resplendently but could find no answering spark in the leaden weight of human bosoms.

Younus was pulling Yusuf Mea by the hand: "Oh, leave me alone, child," cried the old man. "I cannot carry this bag of old bones any longer. There is rest by the wayside." He was immeasurably tired, and once having known the luxury of rest he was loath to take up the grim struggle. Night was passing out and with each gasp the darkness lightened. In a nearby tree a crow flapped its wings joyfully. Ibrahim had begun to cough. The dew had settled on his chest. There was a general sign of activity as pale-faced Dawn stole shyly across the horizon.

Younus was still trying to raise the old

man: "Come on grand-pa, let's be gone. Mother might be waiting for us at home." Ibrahim was still coughing. Yusuf got up slowly and shuffled towards his friend: "What's the matter, Ibrahim?" patting him on the back. "There—isn't—much—left in me, brother," Ibrahim said between gasps. "My ribs seem to be touching my spine." "Tch—tch—tch, our old bones are not worth carrying about, but while we live we must go on I suppose. Come on friend, let's be on our way." Some of the stragglers had already started, bundles upon their heads, with hope in their steps. The morning was cold, and a soft breeze whispered among the leaves. The nearby pools were breaking into a thousand ripples. The vagrants rinsed their mouths and washed their faces before setting out. Younus clung to Yusuf Mea's hand and helped the old man along. Impatiently he wished grand-pa could walk faster, or that he would allow him to run all the way until he came to the familiar outskirts of the village. He closed his eyes ecstatically and saw again the fence of aloes, and the pathway trickling along right to the doorstep of their hut. His recollections of his home were hazy, but he would find mother there awaiting him with open arms and a bowl of steaming rice. The delightful vision brought a smile to his lips and a glow to his hollowed cheeks. Yusuf was too preoccupied with his own weariness to notice anything else, but he wished the child would not keep on pulling at him. He could



not walk faster, in fact, he was beginning to wonder if he would ever reach his destination.

"This is the end," cried old and withered Shankar Pandit, "I can go no further." He was shivering. He had once been the presiding priest at the village temple, they had watched him daily going to the shrine with flowers in his hands, his lips murmuring prayers. For a second the cavalcade halted, stunned. The old man had closed his eyes and was breathing painfully. Then they took up their march. There was nothing they could do. Naran and Dhiru looked back, and remembered that this man had all his life been in the midst of their joys and sorrows. When Naran's father died it was Shankar Pandit who had helped in the last rites, when Dhiru's daughter had been married it was Shankar Pandit that had presided over the ceremony. He was now dying by the wayside. They had left him to die alone. Another person whose conscience troubled him was Kishen the *chamar*. For a few yards he followed the procession and kept in its wake, but he was uneasy. Then suddenly determined, without one word he turned back and retraced his steps to where Shankar Pandit had fallen. He was muttering: "Water, water!" Kishen looked helplessly round and then deftly twisting a few leaves into a vessel he dipped it in the pool. Slowly he knelt beside the dying man: "*Thakur*, here is water. Won't you drink it yourself?"

"Give it to me. Give it to me," cried the priest, his head lolling about in the dust. Kishen was troubled—how could he an untouchable defile the *brahmin's* mouth by giving him water to drink? It would damn him, Kishen, for all incarnations to come. Yet there was no other way and with a "Forgive me, *Thakur*," he lifted the priest's head and gently poured water in his mouth.

"Ah! Who is it that has eased my hour of death? God will bless you, my friend."

Kishen was in a dilemma—why tell the priest who had given him water? He Kishen had done the unpardonable but old Shankar Pandit would be saved the burden of sin if he had unknowingly taken water from the hands of an untouchable. While the Pandit fumbled with swiftly darkening eyes for his benefactor, Kishen the *chamar* stole away softly knowing he had done his utmost and soon the old man's soul would wing its way towards eternity. It was not for Kishen to delay it.

Shankar Pandit had once held a revered position in the lives of the villagers, and seeing him fall by the wayside had struck a dart of actual sorrow in their benumbed hearts. They were not callous. Seeing him go down had been like tearing an important page out of their lives—how it would ever read coherently again they dully wondered. Death had during the past months been their bed-fellow, taken off the best of themselves until they had been left dehumanised, mechanised

with no will to live nor the courage to die. Therefore death no longer shocked or frightened them, it was the one sure and inevitable thing in their lives, but the loss of the priest created a real void, yet they had been powerless. They could have waited beside him, but they could not have saved him. Remorse and the fear of the future brought a morbid silence upon them. The women in particular were hushed, they felt they had been found wanting. But weariness was upon them and they were impatient for their journey's end.

The road was bearing them on its bosom towards where they wanted to go. It answered sympathetically to the pressure of their feet, it seemed to realise their tiredness and to it their footsteps confided the bewilderment, the expectation and their fear. It was all contained in the pace of their gait. In spite of the barrenness of their lives they could still expect, and the gentle road that had once shown them the way to the city was sad for what awaited them. It was carrying these helpless people onwards to disillusionment, it was powerless to stop them. Their once jaunty spirits were dampening down, the lagging foot steps told a tale of weariness in spirit and a tired body. Children could no longer walk, their mothers carried them as far as they could. Rests were more frequent, which were restless with misgivings. Even the women had grown querulous and frequently admonished their children, and hopelessness gathered the men even more closely in

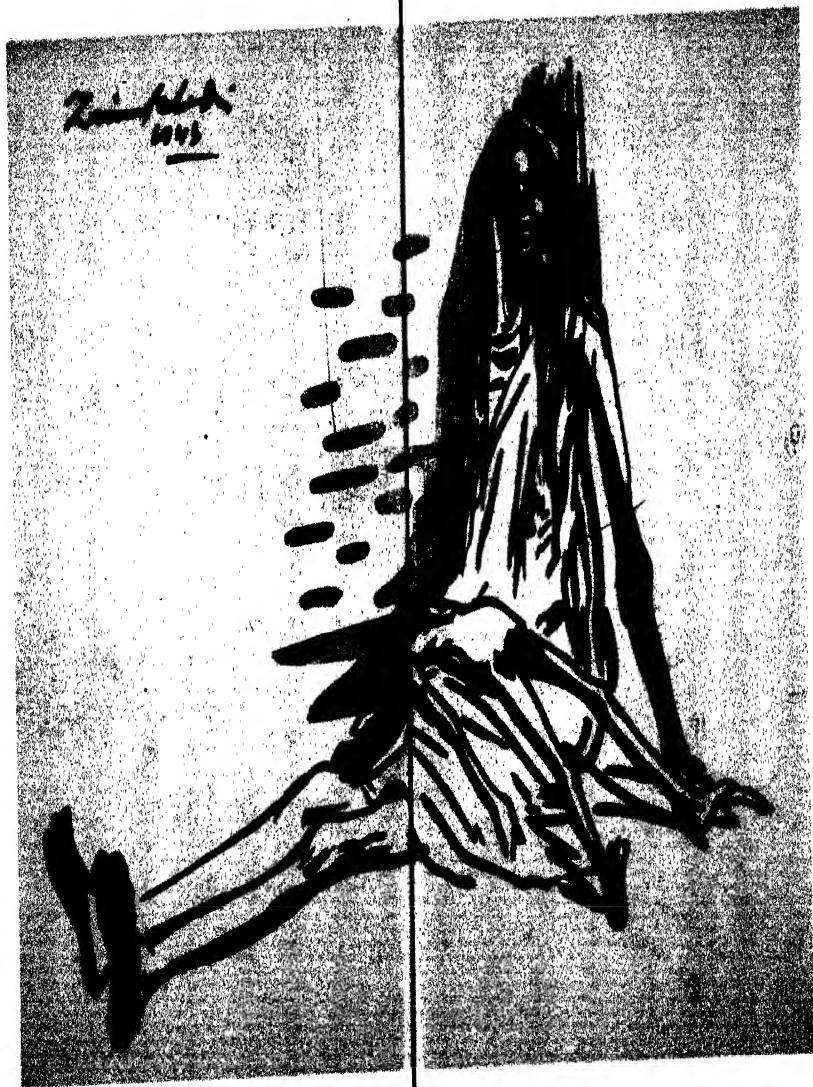
its embrace. Whenever the old men could they just lay down with eyes closed, as still as death, wishing that they would not be called upon to start for many a day as yet. Younus was pleading with his grandfather, he was tired and tearful. "Only a little further, grand-pa."

The sun was beating remorselessly upon the ragged band; and their bodies were streaming with perspiration. Mothers wet dirty rags from the pools and covered their children's heads, but upon their own heads the sun beat furiously. The way had become tortuous, and the road seemed to burn and hurt their feet. It had stiffened with their resistance, and its softness of character had given way to a sternness which took toll of their feet and their spirits. It haunted them and their progress slowed down. Only a few miles now separated them from their long-desired village home.

It was the "bridal hour"—a time between sunset and night when the earth is drenched with a golden light that sprinkles gold dust upon the tree tops and grey huts. It streaks across the pool and lights up the foliage of trees at unusual angles. It is an hour of enchantment, when for a few moments the poverty, the drabness, the pettiness of life is lost in this shower of ethereal light. There was such a setting as when a tinsel crown shines and turns to real gold, that the ragged band appeared upon the outskirts of their village. The familiar boundary of aloes brought a



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quickenings to their hearts, even up to that time they had feared that perhaps when they arrived nothing would be the same. The touselled heads of the coconut palms bent to the breeze and saluted them. Silent sentinels, they had remained steadfast through troublous times.

Old Yusuf Mea with tear-blinded eyes felt the coconut palms, as if he were embracing his nearest and dearest. They gave him a sense of stability. His tears wetted their bark. He stumbled on after the rest, wiping his eyes.

There stood the village—alone, silent, reproachful. For a second they paused, awkward as people are who have a sense of guilt. Then they looked again. Not a roof remained, some walls had crumbled leaving the hut open on two sides. Everything showed the trace of the monsoon's ravages, but still the village had stood awaiting them like a mother who through tears and sorrow is ever ready to receive her vagrant children. Their wandering feet felt cool and soft as they streamed through the narrow foot-track towards their homes.

Kali stood at the entrance of the hut. She seemed to hear it peopled with familiar figures, ghostly laughter and voices kept vigil with her as alone she stood bereft of her kith and kin. It was unbelievable—she swept a bewildered hand over her brow and collapsed on the door-step. Younus was running along. He had left grand-pa far behind, but he



stopped short wondering which had been their hut. They were all so alike, roofless, decrepit and tumbling down, at last joyfully he recognised some chalk drawings he had once made on the inside wall. The rain had lashed against it but they were not quite deleted. His mother had slapped him for scribbling on the walls, and he had run to grand-pa weeping for comfort. His little heart thumping, he raced indoors: "Mother! Mother! Are you there?" There was silence. He shouted "Mother!" A gust of wind carried it away into the distance.

Yusuf Mea vaguely heard the child sobbing. He was gazing entranced. Standing with his hand on Ibrahim's shoulder he mumbled, "*Allah*, be praised. It is a grand sight." The hungry peasants stood about all round them—awestruck. Far and away dancing in the breeze the paddy, slender and golden, beckoned cheerfully. Fields of green and gold stretched on all sides of them. Speechless they knelt and kissed the earth that out of its womb had bequeathed this to them.

## FACTS AND FIGURES



## FACTS AND FIGURES

It is difficult to be objective about a major disaster such as Bengal has had to face, but facts and figures invariably help one to do so. They serve as a restraint on emotional reactions and focus one's thoughts on reality. But in this too we are handicapped as vital statistics are sadly wanting. The recording of births and deaths in normal conditions is extremely poor, and in time of stress it can well be imagined to be utterly neglected. Thus registered figures have little value, and only intensive research give some measure of authentic data.

With an object of providing correct famine statistics the Department of Anthropology of the Calcutta University has made a sample survey of ten out of the twenty-eight affected districts. It is the first attempt of its kind. Their method of approach to the problem is quite different from the official one which leaves much to be desired, to quote the press statement issued by the Calcutta University: "The method of enquiry followed to ascertain the facts was the generalological method, in which each family unit has its generalogy drawn up, and details are noted on this basis. This method leads to collection of facts as contrasted to the usual official mode of just asking the village *chowkidar* or at best the president of the Union Board. This detail

is noted as discrepancies are likely to be found between these statistics and official figures." On the question of mortality the statement goes on to say: "The statistics of eight districts have so far been tabulated. They cover 816 family units with a total membership of 3,840. The total deaths in these groups during June-July 1943 to November-December 1943 has been 386 or a little over 10 per cent during six months."

Commenting editorially on the lack of correct statistics and the inefficiency of Government to supply them, *The Statesman* says: "Official figures of starvation-mortality for the province of Bengal as a whole are unavailable to the public. There has been sustained outcry for them or even of some up-to-date provincial vital statistics irrespective of starvation mortality. . . After arduous journalistic endeavour we incline to the belief that such statistics do not exist. But Calcutta's population is taken at 3,000,000 (perhaps an over-estimate), and Bengal's 60 million, then on the basis of 535 starvation deaths weekly for October in the provincial capital there should now be 10,710 weekly in the whole province."

P. C. Joshi, leader of the Communist Party, undertook a six weeks' tour of the affected areas and writing in November he approximates: "My estimate is that 5,000,000 would die off by the end of December. I am certain it is not an over-estimate." He also remarks that: "There are no official figures for total deaths by starvation. When the Govern-

ment of India wanted the figures, the Bengal Government asked by turns the Civil Supply, Home and Revenue Departments, but nobody knew! These departments are supposed to fight the famine and they don't know these basic facts."

A press note issued by the Government on March 11th, 1944, commenting on Bengal's vital statistics shows that there was an increase of 58 per cent over the average of the past 5 years on total mortality from all causes. The average death rate of previous years has been 1,184,903, but 1943 shows 1,873,749, therefore the excess being 688,846. According to the Government note these figures have been collected from those recorded by the Union Board Presidents who are the statutory registrars of births and deaths. As I have mentioned previously that normally the consciousness about such registration is limited, and at the time when people were just dying like flies all over the province it is almost certain that no proper record of deaths or births was kept. The conditions were chaotic enough to disturb the general trend of life in people with a greater civic consciousness than ourselves, so that in our case it became trebly so and it was quite impossible for the normal processes of civic administration to function efficiently. Therefore it is not too much to say that such figures of total mortality as supplied by the Government, in view of their sources of information, are out by over 30 to 50 per cent. Taking just isolated cases at random, for

instance in Munshiganj (a sub-division of Dacca district in East Bengal, one of the worst affected areas) it was estimated early in December 1943 that 1,000 persons were dying daily from malaria in epidemic form. Mr. K. C. Neogy showed at the Central Assembly, in November last year, that in Calcutta alone 37,800 people had died in 10 months as opposed to the average of 28,000 the previous five years. The Food Member, Sir J. P. Srivastava, at the same time informed the members of the Assembly that the Central Government had no information regarding what proportion of such deaths was due to starvation, or of figures regarding deaths in different districts of Bengal. Such was the colossal ignorance of the Central Government when the whole of this province was under the black wave of famine and destitution. Was this ignorance due to mere inefficiency or was it simulated to aid prevarications in the answering of uncomfortable questions? Dinajpur in N. Bengal is known to be a malarial area, but it was with difficulty that any quinine could be made available for the treatment of the disease. The black market for quinine was rampant. Over 12,000 people died in this area during the period from June to December. Out of a total population of 30,000 in Chittagong town, 3,000 died in five months—and this district has not only been ravaged by famine but has had to face the greatest horror of air raids for the past two

years. It lies nearest to the war-ridden Arakan and one hopes that if the Japanese attempt an invasion through this area, it is these people of Chittagong who will help to stem their onslaught. But harried by epidemics, want of food, malnutrition—can one expect them to create a formidable defence of their country? The people of Chittagong have a marvellous tradition of nationalism and therefore is it that in spite of such tremendous odds fifth column propaganda finds little reception. Noakhali, another important district in Eastern Bengal, had a population of little over two millions, but of these 250,000 have died and 200,000 were on the verge of death by the end of 1943. In Faridpur (also E. Bengal) during the latter 5 months of last year 546,971 people were affected by malaria, out of whom 30,057 died.

Tracing the origin of the crisis Chowdhury Moazzem Hossein, M.L.C., Secretary of the Bengal Muslim League Relief Committee, made some most pertinent remarks regarding the gravity of the situation: "From March or April this year (1943) people began to starve because rice had disappeared from the market and the black market rate was so high in some places being Rs. 100 a maund that it was beyond the reach of the people. Out of 6 crores (60 millions) of people in the province nearly  $5\frac{1}{2}$  crores had been affected by the food crisis. Many people had to quit their villages in search of food in the town; those who remained in the villages had to perish; and



those who went to towns had also to struggle for food. Above all diseases like malaria, cholera, etc., had overpowered the devitalized people and mass starvation led to mass destitution. . . . Bengal is threatened with physical extinction and moral collapse. Where will be the Muslim League if hundreds of thousands of Muslims die? What will be the meaning of Pakistan where there will be skeleton-like sub-humans in desolate villages?"

The report of the Department of Anthropology says: "As the death rate for Bengal does not exceed thirty per thousand in normal years, *i.e.*, fifteen per thousand in six months, the excess mortality of 85 per thousand that is  $8\frac{1}{2}$  per cent has to be ascribed to famine and the pestilence that followed in its wake. As some of the areas in N. Bengal were much less affected than W. or C. Bengal or the deficit areas of E. Bengal some reduction has to be made to estimate the total mortality figures for Bengal. It will probably be an underestimate of the famine to say that two-thirds of the total population were affected more or less by it. On this basis the probable total number of deaths above the normal comes to well over three and a half millions."

The American magazine *Life* featured Bengal's distress under the significant heading: "One million Indians die to point terrible moral of inflation." Their diagnosis of the situation was as such: "Actually India had more grain this year than in 1942 or 1941. There were local shortages but there were two

chief reasons. One was the partial breakdown of responsible government between the British Raj and native autonomy. The other was simply inflation."

Mr. Amery even from the remote fastnesses of Whitehall is inevitably woven into the life of India and Indians, usually with a disastrous effect. His conventional vagueness and usually wrong figures and information has created reasonable indignation not only among Indians but among progressive-minded people all over the world. In fact, his callousness towards the Bengal famine has shocked most thinking people to the core. Warren Hastings was impeached before the House of Commons. It was a crude punishment for the vulgar crime of bribery and corruption, but Leopold Amery has qualified for something more subtle and more effective for his handling of the Indian situation. Even *The Statesman* upon whose editorials are moulded the minds of thousands of "empire-building" Britishers, who look up to its wisdom for revealing the tides of war and men, has unhesitatingly said: "There is thus this ugly possibility; adept at understatement Mr. Amery admitted that Bengal's death roll from starvation 'might be higher' than his 1,000; the very imperfect official statistics available suggest that it might also be higher than over 9,000 or 11,000 which figures have those official statistics as their shaky base." Earlier the same paper had commented on Mr. Amery's speech in Parliament as: "Mr. Amery's

speeches would be more acceptable in this country were they less habitually smug." In that same speech Mr. Amery remarked that it was largely due "to its (Central Government's) exertions that what might have been a situation of widespread serious distress has been confined to Bengal, Cochin, Travancore and parts of Deccan." It appears strange that nobody asked Mr. Amery the meaning of widespread—considering that Bengal alone contained a population larger than Great Britain, and the provincial government had admitted that the province was in the grip of a terrible famine.

The American newspaper *P.M.* of December 9th devoted much space to the story: "Britain says 'No' to Wheat Gift for starving India—Canadian Government offer of a hundred thousand tons rejected by Mr. Leopold Amery." *P.M.*'s correspondent revealed this story after due consultation with Governmental authorities in Washington and after discussing the question of shipping etc. To this announcement in the *P.M.* India Office put forward the excuse that its attitude was based on Amery's report regarding difficulties of shipping.

Among the many inaccurate and evasive statements made by the Secretary of State one was regarding deaths from cholera for the whole of Bengal in October as being 5,349, but according to a member of the provincial legislature in one *thana* of Chittagong alone 5,000 had died of cholera. Apart from this during August and September thousands died of

cholera and malaria in the district of Murshidabad. His estimation of deaths from starvation of 15,352 in Calcutta for four months ending December 11th is also of the same class of misstatements as death-roll figures given before from reliable authorities all show. People who have daily, hourly watched their brothers and sisters scrape the buckets or mutely die by the road-side can only wonder at the callousness of a man who is supposed to be at the helm of Indian affairs. Is it mere ignorance or the fact that it touches the heart of bureaucrats not at all that poor Bengalis die in thousands? One is inclined to echo P. C. Joshi's statement: "As Malaya and Burma will go down in history as an example of what happens to colonial defence under imperialist rule, the tragedy of Bengal will illustrate what happens to colonial economy under its dispensation."

The suffering of children during those darkest days passed all bounds, and it is estimated that infant mortality has been extremely high. "The proportion of children below five years of age has varied from 30 per cent to 50 per cent of the total deaths. The figures bring out the need of maintaining and increasing the number of milk centres in all the affected areas," declares the statement issued by the Department of Anthropology of the Calcutta University as a result of its sample survey. Yet most milk centres have closed down for want of funds, because people feel that the famine is over. Those who are

engaged in relief work cry in the wilderness that the need is great if a future generation is to be saved, but even such personages as Mr. Casey, the new Governor of Bengal, who are supposed to make responsible utterances, maintain that the famine is over. Not long before in the Bengal Assembly it was admitted by the Government that there had been a substantial sale of children during the famine and that the illicit traffic in women had greatly increased. Such things are the natural results of destitution and the abnormal rise in figures is indicative of the absolute and urgent need for relief still. Even at the best of times when non-official relief waxed strong, the figures given and collected by P. C. Joshi during his tour are significant: "The latest Government figures show that there are 5,442 relief kitchens throughout Bengal. There are 90,000 villages, everyone of which needs relief while there is only one kitchen to every 15. In other words, existing relief has to be extended 15 times to be able to say that the relief kitchens cover all the most needy cases. The total number fed in all the kitchens put together is 2,078,886, *i.e.*, at least one out of every 30 Bengalis is already a destitute; the figure for Calcutta is one in every 25; for Chittagong one in every 21; and for Contai, which the Viceroy visited, one in every 2."

The present battle is against epidemics, which are taking even a greater toll of people than the actual starvation. The Army is certainly taking a fair share in this struggle and

viewing it from a practical point of view. They are attending to the villages in the coastal areas, which from a military angle are the most important and this is surely a substantial portion of the burden. But with regard to their resources one feels that their help might have been more comprehensive. The institution of the Bengal Medical Relief Co-ordination Committee under the auspices of the leading practitioners of Calcutta has facilitated medical relief and made its enlargement and penetration into the interior possible. But the work is uphill, since about two-thirds of the population is affected, medicines are difficult to procure and philanthropy is rapidly oozing out. Nevertheless those that are interested in the people of this province and their misfortunes are working with unflagging zeal and energy to bring the population back to health. This entails not only medical relief but diet and the will to live—that incentive is wanting. In an editorial *The Statesman* pertinently remarks: "... the Army in spite of its own heavy commitments had so far provided in the affected districts 60 medical officers, 45 military detachments and a considerable number of mobile dispensaries and first-aid posts. This is quite good enough as far as it goes. But is it enough regard being had to the immensity of the problem that faces all of us? Have the Government of Bengal any definite plans of medical relief in the rural areas? If they have, will they make it public? The districts need abundant

quantities of quinine at the moment. Will the authorities tell us how many pounds of quinine have been sent to the malaria-stricken districts? Are the people in the remote villages receiving their doses of quinine regularly? If not what steps are being taken in the matter? Will it be very difficult to revive the old system of selling quinine at nominal prices through the post offices? Is it not likely to prove an effective way of making quinine available to the people in the far off villages?"

Bengal's inheritance of culture has hitherto been held aloft amidst all vicissitudes and in fortune and misfortune it burnt as a beacon for her sons. With their hands they tended the lamp of achievements, and their contribution has not been small to the culture of India. To-day the future of that culture stands in danger because schools are having to close down due to destitution of families. Hunger is driving them to the gutter and the next generation is taking shape out of this morass without schooling or education. In this land of illiteracy the hunger for knowledge has always been great, the majority have lacked opportunity but wherever there has been a possibility they have rushed to quench their thirst. But a greater and more primitive hunger has done away with whatever little opportunities they ever had and the province is faced with the possibility of a black curtain descending on culture. It is all inter-connected with the economic future of the pro-

vince, and unless some drastic steps are taken to restore balance Bengal will revolve in progressive destitution. All that Bengal's heritage has meant stands to be extinguished overnight.

There is an added foreboding of disaster in the terrible toll taken of the women by prostitution. Upon woman depends greatly the balance and morale of a nation, and therefore the seriousness of this calamity is of extraordinary significance. It is the inevitable development of economic stress as well as the demand, and taken in relation to national life it indicates the setting-in of social disintegration. It has been officially admitted in the Bengal Assembly (as reported in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*) that illicit traffic in girls for immoral purposes had been on the increase. In Chittagong town, by October and November of last year, mass prostitution was prevalent among the destitutes. The All-Parties Relief Committee of Netrakona (E. Bengal) rescued on October 28th 12 girls who had been sold to prostitutes their prices varying from ten annas to Rs. 1/8/-. P. C. Joshi gives his estimate: that about 30,000 from Calcutta's 125,000 destitutes alone have gone into brothels, 1 in 4 of them being young girls." *The Statesman* said on August 13th, 1943: "There is a further great evil about which men have spoken cautiously in public. Many young people, homeless and friendless have disappeared sucked or dragged into the vice of a large city."



This brings before us the vital question of what is to be done—apart from the fact that summary punishments on hoarders and profiteers is demanded since not a single leading price-racketeer has so far been convicted under Defence of India Rules, while local papers reported recently that some village women had been arrested for bringing rice into Calcutta—the total amount confiscated was 15 maunds. This is mere harassment with the help of law. The vast question of rehabilitation is the major issue of the moment, and upon how successfully and efficiently planned this is will depend our safeguard from future troubles. As far back as January the Government officially announced that “It was the intention of the Government that in all sub-divisions where homeless destitute women were found in any appreciable number, one or more homes should be established in suitable places and wherever possible a strong semi-official committee with a large women personnel should be appointed to supervise the work of each women’s home.” On February 11th the following resolution was moved in the Bengal Assembly: “That this Council is of opinion that a census of destitutes and the unemployed, particularly of the rural areas of Bengal, should be taken in time to tackle the urgent problem of rehabilitation and future emergency.” On March 16th B. R. Sen, Director General of Food, speaking at the Central Assembly, New Delhi, said: “The Bengal Government has also taken in hand the repair

of about 10,000 boats which would be ready for use before the rains. A considerable number of these would be returned to the distressed fishermen. For the rehabilitation of destitutes in Bengal, the Bengal Government proposed opening and continuing hospitals, dispensaries, children's homes, milk canteens, employment to destitutes at work centres, special assistance to fishermen, potters and other artisans and loans for the purchase of cattle, housebuilding, etc. Work was already going on along these lines though the scheme as a whole was next awaiting financial sanction by Government." Since then Rs. 8,400,000 have, we hear, been sanctioned for the rehabilitation of destitutes. And for the running of Homes advertisements have already appeared in the local papers for paid officers who will take on this responsibility—qualifications required by them is that they must be Muslims with full knowledge of Islamic culture. This rather strange and odd announcement will have the undesirable effect of injecting communalism where none could and should exist. During the four months up to April the Government has opened a few centres or poor houses which apart from housing the destitutes gives them no training to enable them to rehabilitate themselves. Dole is being given in some areas, but on so small a scale that it leaves a great number without relief. Even though there is so much talk in official circles regarding the passing of the famine, the menace of prostitution through

destitution is in no way minimised. So far this had been rampant in E. Bengal, but it has now come to the suburbs and surrounding districts of Calcutta menacing even the middle classes.

On the part of non-official bodies there is not the same urge and verve as inspired relief work, and there is a general lassitude regarding this more vital need. This of course comes from the want of consciousness regarding the gravity of the situation and the urgency of proper plans for rehabilitation. Then too there is the conventional attitude towards prostitutes and their reclamation in the true sense of the word is not generally welcomed. But there are people who are thinking and planning only there is a dearth of money and workers for large-scale operations which in fact can only be done with the co-operation of the Government. Such people as are willing to undertake this objective—and there are many—must have State aid since the people are primarily the responsibility of the State. At such moments the want of a national government, in the real sense of the word, is acutely felt, for only such an authority will ever place primary importance upon the reclamation and welfare of the people. There is one non-official scheme for introducing rural reconstruction village by village, and indeed this is the only way that the people can be saved from destitution while raising their standard of living as well. Rural reconstruction naturally embraces such vital things as

cottage industries, health and sanitation apart from the actual agricultural improvements, etc. Another scheme there is of not so great a magnitude but it embraces the opening of homes and industrial centres for the homeless and the reclamation of prostitutes. The object of these institutions will be to train women in essential occupations and handicrafts, and to finally band them in co-operatives. So far nothing of very great value has been achieved but there are concrete plans afoot which will probably result in some actual relief in the near future.

The importance of rehabilitation cannot be too often stressed, because it has as yet failed to capture the mind and imagination of the general public. Its long term importance as opposed to mere feeding is quite lost upon the people; that it will mean a new life not only to the destitutes but to the province as a whole appears to have escaped the interest of most. If rehabilitation can be made actual, it will mean the rejuvenation of the whole nation. So long as we allow destitution with its resultant evils to run amock in our national life, its curse will descend upon us as moral and social disintegration. Ultimately it will wrap its tentacles round all types of families—middle class as well as working class, and suck them down into utter decadence. If this is to be avoided, and it must be avoided, then the general public must acknowledge the absolute necessity of planning for rehabilitation on a countrywide basis. Only thus can

an effete bureaucracy be compelled to expend some energy upon the ultimate benefit of the people. By merely reiterating that it is the duty of the State, we avoid issues and shift responsibility. If indeed we are faced with another crisis our rehabilitation plans will go far to prevent the dislocation of last year. Our experiences should be our guide, that if we are again faced with a floating destitute population it is far better to have something to offer it in the way of work and vocational training instead of reducing them to beggary. Therein lies the great importance of considering rehabilitation from the practical point of view of a famine whose aftermath we are facing, and another crisis that might be ahead of us.

There has been a general tendency to minimise the Bengal situation, saying that it has all been rather over-dramatised by the hysterical outburst of Bengalis. During those dark days of last year which are still too recent, it became more and more apparent that nothing had been overstressed. For a time censorship drew a black pall over the export of famine news, and therefore people abroad were for a very long time without any correct knowledge of the situation. Comments by such papers as *The Times* bordered on callousness, and a desire not to see the true magnitude of the situation. Progressive opinion was nevertheless stirred in both Britain and America, and there has been unhesitating condemnation of Britain's rule

in India which could not prevent man-made famine. *The New Statesman and Nation* said that the "tragedy passed a judgment on our rule in India." Even *The Statesman* has unhesitatingly called upon all thinking Britons to realise their responsibility. But it would not be wrong to say that of all the money collected for relief work by all organisations not one-twentieth of it was given by the British in India. In general there was little feeling for the suffering people, in fact one person was heard to remark that Indians have always been in this condition and have no desire to improve. It fell to my lot to speak to a group of European women regarding the famine situation, many among whom were missionaries, and while appreciating my plain statement of facts they admitted that they had not been aware that such a state of affairs had ever existed and was still in existence. In spite of words of sympathy I came away empty handed, and have up to this date received no concrete proof of their feeling for starving Bengal. It is the result of years of isolation, of having drawn a magic circle of racial complexities around them, that even in the midst of chaos and trouble they live their lives untouched. There is no blame on to other shoulders to admit that as long as W India, it is upon Britain th must rest.

In April 1944—where ~~are~~<sup>the</sup> we? Pr  
tion reaches one that in

Dist.) and in Comilla (E. Bengal) rice is selling at Rs. 26/- and Rs. 27/- per maund while the controlled price is Rs. 15/- per maund (3 to 4 times greater than pre-war rates). Pandit Kunzru of the Servants of India Society said in February: "Destitutes are again returning to Calcutta and the deficit areas are really threatened with another famine if the Government fails to provide adequate transport for the movement of food-grains from the surplus areas to the deficit districts." The position will actually be much worse in this that there are no stocks at all, and upon the purchase and handling of this last crop will depend whether there is another crisis in the food situation. According to B. R. Sen, the Director-General of Food, there was no intrinsic shortage of rice, but the real difficulty lay in movement of grains from surplus to deficit areas. This however was being done by the help of the military authorities. He also said that the plentiful harvest had "followed on a period of shortage and distress in which the normal carry over had been consumed." Apart from this there is a general lack of confidence on the part of all sections of people in the ways of the government both provincial and Central, and even Mr. Sen stated that it was highly important that this be won back. This is possible only if the Government really and truly takes the public into its confidence, does not minimise the grievousness of the situation, asks for the co-operation of non-official bodies not in merely advisory capacity but actively,

and in general seeks the help of the public in sincerely wishing to end this distress. The lost confidence will come back naturally and rapidly if a truly national government starts to function. Under the present bureaucratic regime under the cloak of provincial autonomy the rift between the people and the government will continue. The food of the people has been made a gambit of power politics, and lives of thousands have been gambled away in this fashion, therefore it is unlikely that they can have any confidence or trust in the present regime. Unless some vital change is forthcoming we must flounder from one disaster to another.



## ARE YOU AWARE?

1. That more people have died in Bengal from epidemics than in the worst days of scarcity.
2. That to-day 30 millions out of Bengal's 60 millions are stricken with malaria.
3. That land is passing from the peasants to the village rich. The rich are becoming richer and the poor poorer.
4. That in Nilphamari (Rangpur Dist., N. Bengal) the number of property sale deeds was 11,915 during August, September, October, 1943 as against 4,368 the previous year.
5. That in Narayanganj (E. Bengal) daily 150 to 195 sales or mortgages were registered last year as against the normal 10 to 15.
6. That death-rate among adult men is much higher than among adult women. Consequently the loss of wage-earners is tremendous. Infant mortality—30 per cent to 50 per cent of the total deaths are children under 5 years of age.
7. That nearly two-thirds of landless labour is affected either by death or by devitalisation.
8. That 40 per cent of the population of Munshiganj (Dacca Dist.) was down with small-pox.

9. That in some areas of Midnapore and 24-Parganas 90 per cent of the total population are the victims of malaria.
10. That the economically ruined women of Bengal are being reduced to mass prostitution.
11. That the incidence of venereal disease in Calcutta is between 33 to 45 per cent; in Chittagong and Noakhali (E. Bengal) it is correspondingly high.
12. That the estimated produce of rice last year was 30 per cent more than the average, yet prices were up by 40 to 50 per cent.
13. That even now in Chittagong rice is being sold in the black market at one seer for Re. 1/8/- (pre-war prices in the country districts was 8 seers to the rupee).
14. That the estimate for medical relief for this year is Rs. 6,200,000.

THE END









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